ALEX COLVILLE

Life & Work by Ray Cronin

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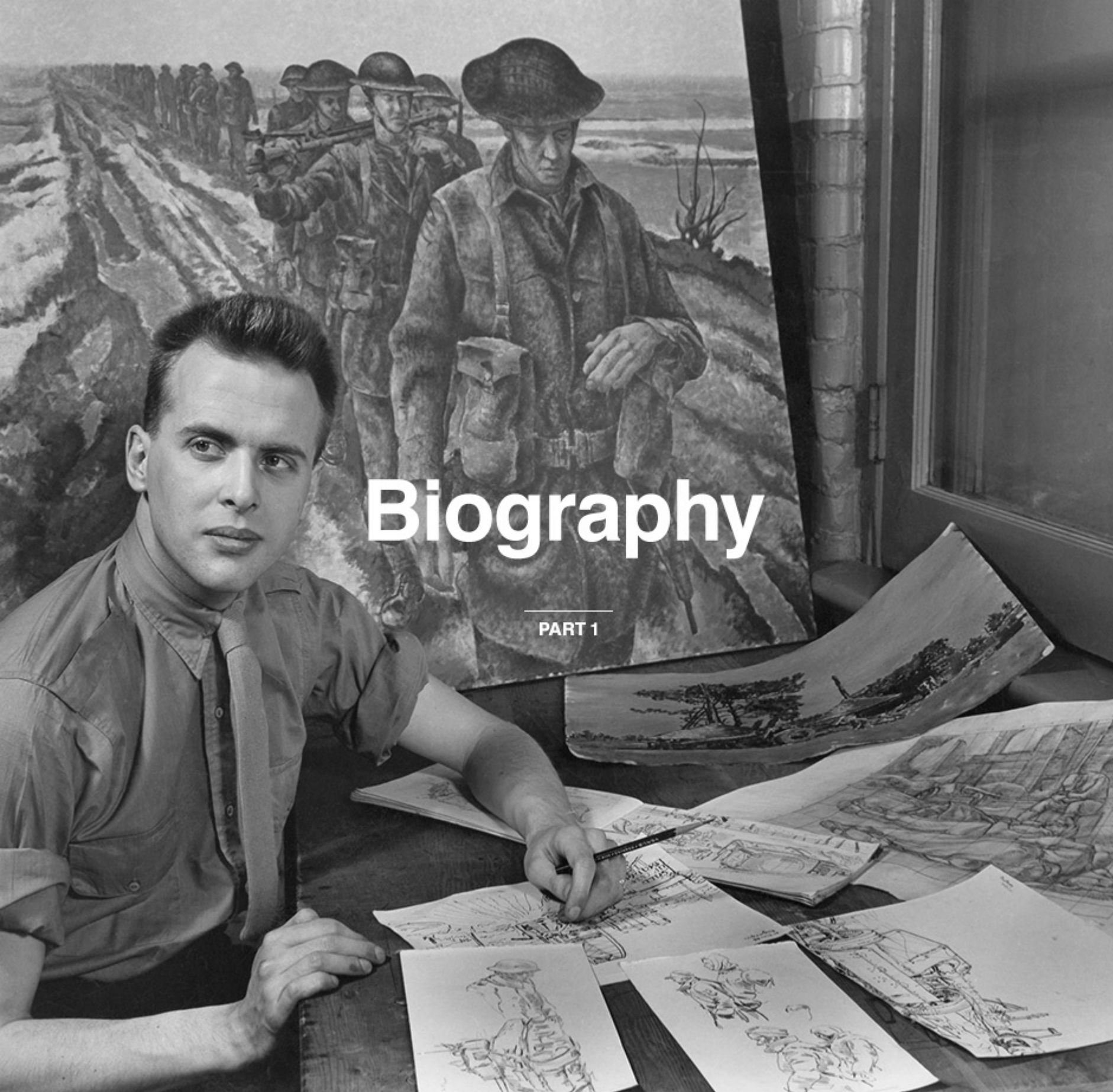
Biography

Alex Colville's career spanned his service as an official war artist during the Second World War to his death in 2013. From the early 1950s he had achieved a signature style, maintaining a set of images, subjects, and contextual concerns that remained remarkably consistent. His family (in particular his wife, Rhoda), the immediate environs of his homes in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, and animals (often his own family pets) were his most frequent subjects.

Formative Years

Although Alex Colville is often heralded as an iconic painter from the Maritimes, he was born in Toronto, on August 24, 1920. David Alexander (Alex) Colville was the second son of David Colville and Florence Gault. David Sr. was from a small Scottish mining town and immigrated to Canada in 1910. He spent his career working in construction, specifically in steel work, building bridges and other large engineering projects. In 1914 he married Florence, who was from Trenton, Ontario. David's work kept them on the move for the first years of their marriage, with stops in Moncton, New Brunswick; Cape Breton, Nova Scotia; and Trenton. In 1920 they moved to Toronto, where their five-year-old son, Robert, soon had a little brother, Alex.

LEFT: Alex Colville, age eleven, near Tidnish, Nova Scotia, where his family had a summer cottage, c. 1931. **RIGHT:** Alex Colville, age eighteen, with his parents, David and Florence, c. 1938.

In 1927 the Colvilles moved to St. Catharines, Ontario, and two years later to Amherst, Nova Scotia. David had taken a job as plant supervisor at Robb Engineering and he worked there for the rest of his career. Florence apprenticed to a milliner and eventually started her own business. Almost upon arrival in Nova Scotia the young Alex Colville contracted pneumonia, from which, by his own account, he almost died. His recovery in those pre-antibiotics days was long and isolated, with six months of lonely bedrest. His mother supplied him with books and art materials, and he filled his time by reading and drawing, developing an interest in art that blossomed in the coming years. Colville notes:

> I stress this business of having pneumonia and almost dying because I think it had an effect on me. In addition, I was lifted out of association with my friends and schoolmates. All through that spring and summer I led an almost solitary life. In this period I became what we usually call an introvert, one whose life is essentially a kind of inner life. I began to read, really for the first time, and I did quite a few drawings, simply because I was alone and had to find something to do. The drawings I made were all of machines, without exception. I drew cars, boats, airplanes, things like that.[1]

Alex Colville, *Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia*, 1940, oil on beaverboard, 30.1 x 40.1 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Stanley Royle, *Incoming Tide, Peggy's Cove*, 1935, oil on pressed board, 30.7 x 40.7 cm, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

The interests kindled in Colville in those months of recovery found an outlet in 1934, when he began to take weekly art classes in Amherst. For three years Colville studied painting, drawing, and sculpture under Sarah Hart (1880–1981), a native of Saint John, New Brunswick, who had studied at The Cooper Union college in New York. Primarily a woodcarver, Hart also taught painting in a Post-Impressionist style influenced by her former teachers. Hart's classes were part of an extension initiative, from New Brunswick, of Mount Allison University's fine art department, which saw faculty holding classes in several small Maritime communities. Program faculty closely monitored participants in order to identify potential full-time students, and Stanley Royle (1888–1961), who became an important early mentor to Colville, took notice of the young student. "Once, or perhaps twice in each year, Mrs. Hart would invite the professor of fine art at Mount Allison University, Stanley Royle, to come and observe the work of the classes," Colville remembered. "Mr. Royle gave me a lot of encouragement, he said that my stuff was good and that I should keep at it."[2]

Royle, from Sheffield, England, had joined the Mount Allison faculty in 1935 and taught there for ten years before returning to the U.K. in 1945. Royle was an accomplished Post-Impressionist painter working *en plein air* in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. He was a graduate of the Sheffield School of Art (now Sheffield Institute of Arts), as were his contemporaries Elizabeth Styring Nutt (1870–1946), the principal of the Nova Scotia College of Art (now NSCAD University), and her predecessor, Arthur Lismer (1885–1969). Royle encouraged Colville to consider art as a profession. Colville was planning to study law and politics, and had been accepted into Dalhousie University in Halifax with an entrance scholarship. Royle secured an equivalent scholarship for Colville at Mount Allison, and in September 1938 he started there in a class of ten students.

First-year portrait class taught by Stanley Royle. Alex Colville stands at easel, far right. Mount Allison University Archives, Sackville.

The school's curriculum under Royle was quite traditional. It focused on drawing and painting from life and copying from classical casts and nineteenth-century paintings and drawings held in the collection of Mount Allison's Owens Art Gallery, which included popular Victoriana such as paintings by Tito Conti (1842–1924) and other painters of the

day, as well as prints by Whistler (1834–1903) and an impressive tondo by Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898). The art school was housed in the gallery, which Royle also directed. Few paintings by Colville from this period have survived, and the ones that have display a Post-Impressionist style much influenced by Royle, as in *Self Portrait*, 1940, and *Interior Owens Art Gallery with Figure*, 1941.

Colville had his first successes as an artist while enrolled at Mount Allison, with works included in exhibitions of the Art Association of Montreal (now Montreal Museum of Fine Arts) in 1941 and the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (RCA) in 1942. This significant achievement must have contributed to Colville's sense that a career in art was possible, though Colville credited a conversation with Royle he had as a seventeen-year-old high school student: "I then asked him if he thought that if I became an artist I would be poor and have a terrible time. Fortunately, he said that he didn't think that would happen. I think I decided virtually that same day that I would be an artist."[3]
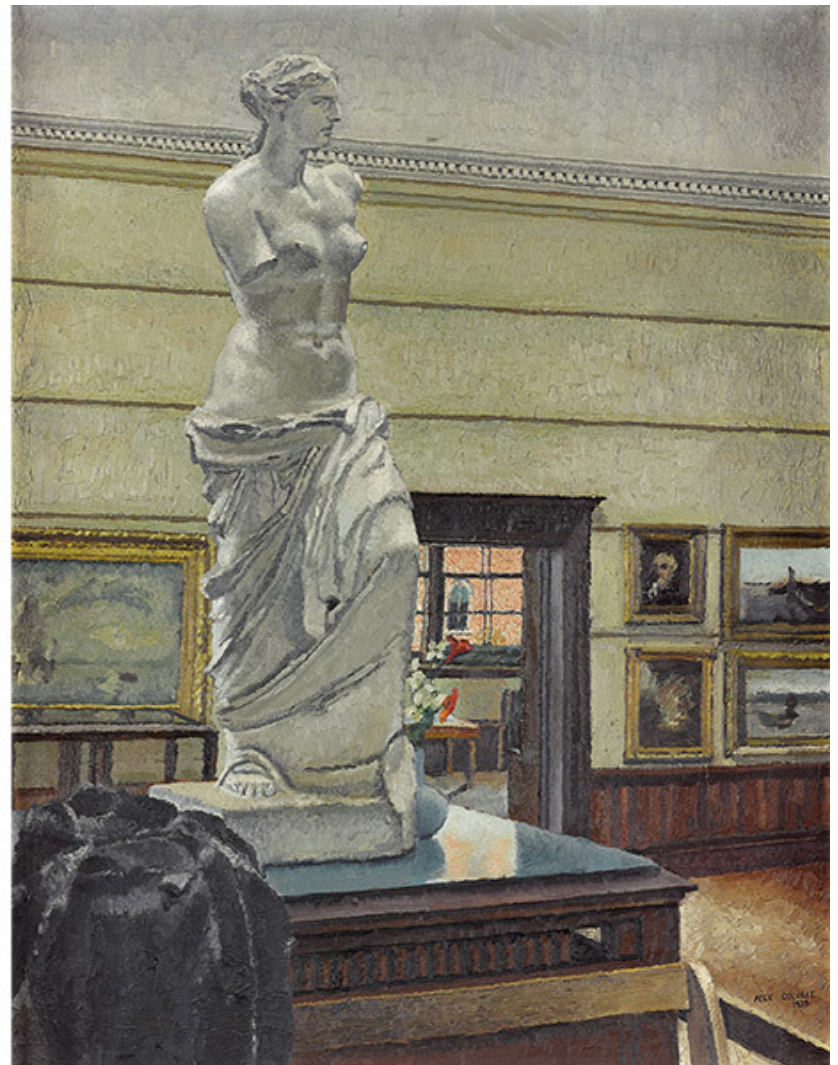
LEFT: Alex Colville, *Self Portrait*, 1940, oil on board, 118 x 89 cm, private collection. **RIGHT:** Alex Colville, *Interior Owens Art Gallery with Figure*, 1941, oil on board, 90 x 69.5 cm, private collection.

This was an ambitious idea in those early war years, especially in a poor region such as the Maritimes, but Colville would have seen such artists as Royle in Sackville, Miller Brittain (1914–1968) in Saint John, and Nutt and D.C. MacKay (1906–1979) in Halifax, all who exhibited nationally and internationally. Their careers made apparent that making a living as a painter was indeed possible. The Canadian art world in the interwar years was smaller and less fractured than today, with groups such as the RCA and the

Canadian Group of Painters and the institution of annual group exhibitions doing much to ensure that artists across the country were aware of one another and their work.

Colville's first-year class in 1938 included a person who became the central figure of his life: Rhoda Wright. Rhoda, born in 1921, was from Wolfville, Nova Scotia. Originally friends, their relationship developed slowly. "We met as freshman at Mount A.," remembered Rhoda. "I really didn't think he was any 'great shakes,' as they say. It took us a long time to get to know each other." The relationship developed, however, with one memory standing out as a turning point for Rhoda:

LEFT: Donald Cameron Mackay, *Shut-in Indian Harbour*, 1937, oil on canvas, 50.9 x 61 cm, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax. RIGHT: Alex Colville, *Untitled*, 1940, oil on pressed board, 40.6 x 50.6 cm, Owens Art Gallery, Mount Allison University, Sackville.

> But there was a night after we had been to a movie downtown and we came out of this old movie theatre into a very snowy winter night and there was a crossroads in the town and we had to go across there to go up York Street. Alex took my hand when we walked across. With his bare hand he held mine and we walked across. That was quite a thrill. Can you imagine that? I think, maybe, that was the beginning of the end of the platonic friendship.[4]

The two were married in August 1942. Their decision to wed was complicated by another momentous event in Colville's life: upon graduation from Mount Allison in the spring of 1942, he had enlisted in the First Canadian Army.

Alex and Rhoda Colville on their wedding day, 1942. The couple is pictured in front of Rhoda's family home in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, where they lived from 1973 until 1998.

Lieutenant D. Alex Colville, War Artist, Third Canadian Infantry Division, Germany, March 4, 1945, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, photograph by Lieutenant Barney J. Gloster.

The Second World War

Colville aspired to be a war artist, as such Canadian painters as A.Y. Jackson (1882–1974) and Arthur Lismer had been in the First World War. However, the official war art program was yet to be instituted when Colville enlisted, and he spent the first two years of his service in non-combatant roles, receiving a commission as a lieutenant in September 1943. He served in Fredericton, New Brunswick, and then in Camp Petawawa, Ontario. In May 1944 he was assigned to London, England, where he was made an official war artist. He spent the next two years documenting Canada's war effort in England and on the continent.

Colville was first stationed with the Royal Army Service Corps in the Northern England county of Yorkshire, where he made sketches of the men and equipment being marshalled to send to France in support of the D-Day invasion. Six weeks later he was assigned to the navy and sailed to the Mediterranean aboard the HMCS *Prince David*, a ship carrying troops for Operation Dragoon, the allied landing in Southern France that followed the successful D-Day landings. He was aboard the *Prince David* for six weeks, after which he returned to England to work up finished paintings from his sketches from Yorkshire and the Mediterranean, as in *Convoy in Yorkshire, No. 2*, 1944. In October 1944 he joined the Third Canadian Infantry Division, where he remained until September 1945. As part of his service he was present at the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, witnessing first-hand the extremes of inhumanity to which Nazi ideology had led Germany. In October he was assigned to Ottawa, where he spent the last six months of his army career creating oil paintings from his sketches and watercolours.

Alex Colville, *Convoy in Yorkshire, No. 2*, 1944, oil on canvas, 76.3 x 102 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

The war had a great impact on Colville, but he always resisted notions that his view of the world was overly coloured by his wartime experience. Author and curator Tom Smart, in *Alex Colville: Return*, makes much of the trauma of the war and read into Colville's paintings a response to horror. "When Colville entered the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp at the end of the war, his artistic sensibility was fixed, petrified by the defining moment of witnessing the mass graves," he writes. "Whether the distance from Bergen-Belsen is measured in days, years or half a lifetime, the vividness of his experience continues to haunt Colville's work."[5] Colville, however, had a very different idea of the war's impact on his art, telling *Toronto Star* critic Peter Goddard that Smart's reading of his art as a "visual testimony" to the horrors of war was "over emphasized." Resisting any characterization as a victim, he continued: "The war had a profound effect

on me. But it was all about the action of war. All my instincts as a kid were toward action. And war is action to the nth degree. It's amazing in a sense how tough people are. I wasn't sickened or horrified or anything."[6]
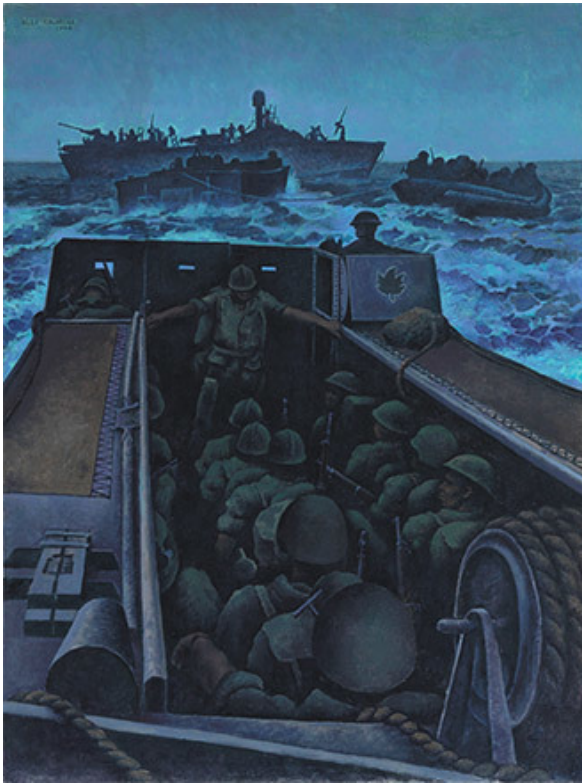
LEFT: Alex Colville, *Landing Craft Assault Off Southern France*, 1944, oil on canvas, 101.4 x 76 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.
RIGHT: Alex Colville, *The Nijmegen Bridge, Holland*, 1946, oil on canvas, 91.6 x 122.7 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

Perhaps as a refuge he chose to remember the war in its action—the convoys, heavy equipment, and vehicles of all descriptions (as in *The Nijmegen Bridge, Holland*, 1946) and in the years of training and preparation that preceded the months of actual fighting after D-Day (as in *Landing Craft Assault Off Southern France*, 1944). Bergen-Belsen was undoubtedly impactful for the young Colville—the sheer scale of the horror was numbing. As he put it, "Well it was kind of chilling. I remember the grave with 7,000 bodies in it and so on, still open. Pretty terrible business."[7] Many critics, including Tom Smart, feel that chill in all of Colville's postwar work.

Mount Allison

Upon his demobilization from the army, Colville was offered a faculty position at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick. This attracted him because, as he wrote, "I decided to settle down in Sackville where I could have the time, the feeling of belonging, the solitude, and, above all, the freedom from distraction which I needed to become oriented as an artist."[8]

A Colville family portrait, 1951. *From left to right*: John, Graham, Alex, Rhoda, Ann, and Charles.

The Colville family settled into Sackville, with Alex teaching and Rhoda staying at home with the children. They had two by this point; their eldest, Graham, had been born in 1944 and their second son, John, in 1946. Charles was born in 1948 and their only daughter, Ann, in 1949. While Rhoda dedicated herself to family, she maintained an interest in creative pursuits, notably playing music and writing playful poems that marked events in the lives of her family and friends.

Initially, Colville found little time for his own creative endeavours as he concentrated on his teaching career and the growth of his young family. His few paintings of the period, for example, *Windmill and Farm*, 1947, were landscapes of the environs around Sackville, depicting farms, horses, and the bridges over the Tantramar Marsh. They hark back to much of his work during the war, providing straightforward renderings of what he saw around him. Student accounts reveal Colville as a meticulous teacher, one focused on skills development and observation. His practice of looking for inspiration in his immediate surroundings was inculcated in such students as Mary Pratt (b. 1935), Tom Forrestall (b. 1936), D.P. Brown (b. 1939), and Christopher Pratt (b. 1935). As Mary Pratt remembered, "He showed me you could just look at the world in its wonderful simplicity and find in that simplicity lots and lots to think about."[9]

However, the time that teaching took from painting frustrated Colville. According to Helen J. Dow, a colleague at Mount Allison who wrote the first major monograph on Colville, at one point he even considered giving up painting to become an architect.[10] A major commission from Mount Allison in 1948 forestalled this, and he completed the large egg-tempera-on-linen painting over that year. This mural, called *The History of Mount Allison*, 1948, was his largest and most complex work to date. It served to assuage his frustration, as he was able to feel that painting could contribute to his family's income. Architecture, while an abiding interest, ceased to be discussed as a possible career. In 1951, Colville had a solo show at the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John. Beyond being his first solo show, this exhibition was notable for several reasons, as it marked the first time his work was written about in newspapers, his first public lecture on his art, and one of his first sales to a public art gallery: the 1950 painting *Nude and Dummy*, to the New Brunswick Museum.[11]

Colville always upheld that *Nude and Dummy* was his first mature work: it represented what he considered to be his own style and was a subject matter fully of his own invention. It seemed to mark a change for Colville, a sign that he had arrived as a painter in his own right. As he maintained, "I was therefore thirty years old before I did anything worthwhile."[12] His Post-Impressionist landscapes of his student days, and the illustrative approach of his war art, provided a strong foundation for this

Alex Colville, *Windmill and Farm*, 1947, oil on Masonite, 71.5 x 55.8 cm, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa.

development, but one only has to compare this painting with paintings such as *Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia*, 1940, or *The Nijmegen Bridge, Holland*, 1946, to see that in these works he had not achieved his mature style.

Colville exhibited regularly throughout the 1950s, with shows at commercial galleries in New York and Toronto, as well as at Hart House Gallery at the University of Toronto (now part of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto). Canadian galleries, including the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and the Art Gallery of Hamilton, began to acquire his work.[13] His paintings began to be associated with the magic realists, particularly his works featuring nude female figures in non-specific landscapes and settings, such as *Nudes on Shore*, 1950, and *Four Figures on Wharf*, 1952. Though these figures were mostly invented, his wife, Rhoda, began to appear in more of his paintings, such as *Woman on Wharf*, 1954, or *Woman at Clothesline*, 1956–57. She soon became a key subject, one extending throughout his career. It was natural for Colville to use his family as models, because of his avowed desire to use his immediate surroundings as subject matter.[14]

Alex Colville, *Four Figures on Wharf*, 1952, casein tempera on card, mounted on Masonite, 43.1 x 78.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Other contemporaneous works, such as *Child and Dog*, 1952, *Soldier and Girl at Station*, 1953, and *Family and Rainstorm*, 1955, show the themes and direction he would pursue for the next six decades: his family, his home, the environs of Sackville or Wolfville (or, very occasionally, other places he lived, such as Santa Cruz, California, or Berlin). The relationships between humans and animals, and men and women, also become predominant themes. These binaries were important for Colville: "The painting starts to work, sometimes, when two elements appear to throw light on each other."[15] Colville had found his voice.

Alex Colville, *Family and Rainstorm*, 1955, glazed tempera on Masonite, 57.1 x 74.9 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

By the early 1960s Colville's career was thriving, with regular sales and exhibitions, and he decided to resign from Mount Allison in 1963. He and Rhoda stayed in Sackville until 1973, and he remained productive during these years with important exhibitions, such as his inclusion in Canada's entry at the 33rd Venice Biennale in 1966. He continued to have solo shows in New York and in 1969 had his first solo exhibition in Germany. Some of his most iconic works were created during this period, including *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965, with its image of a female figure seeming to look straight out at the viewer through a pair of binoculars, and *Church and Horse*, 1964, with its wild black horse running across the picture frame. Colville said of this work, "I did this painting a few months after the assassination of President Kennedy. It's curious how one's mind gets filled up with images, but I recall watching the funeral, as I suppose many people did, with great interest, and being impressed with the black, riderless horse, and I suppose that this has some kind of crazy connection with my having done the painting."[16]

LEFT: Riderless Horse in President John F. Kennedy's Funeral Procession to St. Matthew's Cathedral, November 25, 1963, photograph by Robert Knudson, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston. During the funeral procession in Washington, D.C., a riderless horse is shown with boots reversed in the stirrups, symbolizing a fallen hero. **RIGHT:** Alex Colville, *Church and Horse*, 1964, acrylic on hardboard, 55.5 x 68.7 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1965 Colville was commissioned to design circulation coins commemorating Canada's centennial. This commission meant a lot to the artist, as it represented an unexpected reach to the largest possible Canadian audience—his artworks became part of the daily life of all Canadians for decades. Accolades continued to accumulate for Colville throughout the 1960s, with election to the Order of Canada in 1967 and three honourary degrees: from Trent University in Ontario in 1967, Mount Allison in 1968, and Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia in 1969. The University of California, Santa Cruz, named him a visiting artist and he spent the 1967–68 school year living in California, where he considered staying. However, the lure of his settled life in Sackville was too strong.[17] His London dealer, Harry Fischer, encouraged Colville to move to London, England (which he would not do), and in 1971 helped arrange for a residency in Berlin. This Colville gladly accepted, but not without reservations: although the offer was to work abroad for one year, he negotiated a six-month term in order to reduce the time away from his studio.[18]

Nova Scotia and Later Life

In 1973 Alex and Rhoda moved to Wolfville, Nova Scotia, a small university town much like Sackville. The couple moved into Rhoda's childhood home, a large house on the main street, across from Acadia University. Colville's success continued, with commercial and public shows throughout the 1970s and 1980s and more professional accolades: he received the Canada Council Molson Prize in 1974 and honourary degrees from universities across Canada, including Acadia University in 1975. He was the subject of museum shows in Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands, and in 1978 began his long professional relationship with Toronto's Mira Godard Gallery. Previously, Colville had multiple dealers: the Banfer Gallery in New York and Marlborough Fine Art and Harry Fischer in London. But when he joined Mira Godard's stable of artists, he received almost uninterrupted solo representation by Godard (he briefly left the gallery in

Alex and Rhoda Colville, with Min, outside their home in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, 1988, photograph by Guido Mangold.

the 1990s to be represented by the Drabinsky Gallery, but returned to Godard after the short-lived experiment).

In 1981 Colville was named chancellor of Acadia University, a post he held for ten years. His first museum retrospective, curated by David Burnett and accompanied by a monograph, was mounted in 1983 by the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), Toronto. It subsequently toured across Canada and to Germany. His work was shown in Asia in the mid-1980s, and he continued his commercial career with shows in Toronto and London. In 1991 he was named to the board of directors of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and in 1993 Brian Mulroney, then prime minister of Canada, named him to the Privy Council for Canada, an entity set up to advise the prime minister. Colville painted and made prints, and notable images such as *French Cross*, 1988, and *Horse and Girl*, 1984, were created in this period. His style remained the same, a steadfast approach to technique and content that he sustained throughout his career. Colville's consistency was a hallmark of his work—his style, once achieved, remained recognizably and uniquely his own. That consistency, however, was not always valued.

LEFT: Alex Colville, *French Cross*, 1988, acrylic polymer emulsion on board, 56.5 x 80 cm, private collection. RIGHT: Alex Colville, *Horse and Girl*, 1984, acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 45 x 60 cm, private collection.

The 1980s were a period in which Colville was on the receiving end of poor reviews. *The Globe and Mail* said of his 1983 retrospective, "Like many other mediocre art works similarly wrought with time-consuming care and obsessive attention, these paintings invite a certain kind of admiration—the kind we willingly accord a painting of the Last Supper on a thumbtack, or the precisionist kitsch of Salvador Dali."[19] An article in *Canadian Forum* attacked Colville's status as the "Head Boy of Canadian Painters."[20] In part, this criticism may have been based in Colville's lack of interest in current debates surrounding postmodernism, sexual politics, or overt political commentary—all of which were filling the galleries of the day, usually in photographic, video, and installation formats. In the eyes of many critics, Colville's work was irredeemably conservative.

This continued well into the 1990s, with dismissive reviews and articles appearing regularly in response to a Colville exhibition. No one was more blunt, in print at least, than *Globe* critic John Bentley Mays. For instance, he described Colville's

Verandah, 1983, as, "a scene so banal and airless it leaves the viewer gasping. BUT this airlessness brings us to another of Colville's manifest powers: his ability to keep making pictures of incomparable emptiness, coldness, emotional desolation, year after year, with no advance, experiment, hesitation, questing. No artist's work seems more stagnant, less vital."[21]

However, Colville had his supporters in the art world and in the public who seemingly never lost their fascination with him. A 1987 *Canadian Art* magazine cover story on Colville went out of its way to refute earlier criticisms, noting the very comments mentioned above.[22]

As the twentieth century drew to an end, the good reviews, honours, and accolades far outnumbered the criticisms. In 1997, Colville, who in 1951 had described himself as a "conceptual" rather than "perceptual" artist,[23] received an honourary degree from the hotbed of Canadian conceptual art, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. From 1993 to 2003 Colville was the subject of four museum exhibitions, two of which toured the country, including the last of his museum exhibitions mounted in his lifetime, *Alex Colville: Return*, organized by the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. Until 2005 it toured to Halifax, Fredericton, Toronto, London, Saskatoon, and Edmonton. In 2003 Colville received the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts, as well as the Order of Nova Scotia. He continued to paint and had five exhibitions at commercial galleries between 2002 and 2010.

Alex Colville, *Verandah*, 1983, acrylic polymer emulsion on Masonite, 80 x 80 cm, private collection.

In 2012 he suffered two major losses: in late February his middle son, John, died of heart failure, and on December 29 Rhoda passed away. During the summer of 2013, when he was 92 years old, Alex Colville died at home in Wolfville. Rhoda, his wife of seventy years, died at 91. "True love is never long enough," wrote the *Ottawa Citizen*'s Peter Simpson. "Surely Alex's heart was broken, and less than seven months later, on July 16, 2013, his heart stopped beating."[24]

In 1951 at a lecture in support of his first solo exhibition, Colville said about the audience for painting: "We can only conclude that our audience, that our public, must consist of those people from all classes who are capable of experiencing painting. We must acknowledge the worthiness of this small public and hope, as I believe, that it is steadily growing, not only in numbers, but in understanding and appetite. These are the people we paint for."[25]

Colville's hopes for an expanded audience were prescient: *Alex Colville*, the largest exhibit of the artist's work ever mounted, opened at the AGO in August 2014. It became the best-attended Canadian exhibition in the AGO's history and its first Canadian show to be in the gallery's top ten–attended exhibitions.[26] It subsequently travelled to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, where it drew large audiences and met with critical praise.

Alex Colville, C.C. (Companion, Order of Canada), 1986, photograph by Harry Palmer.

Key Works
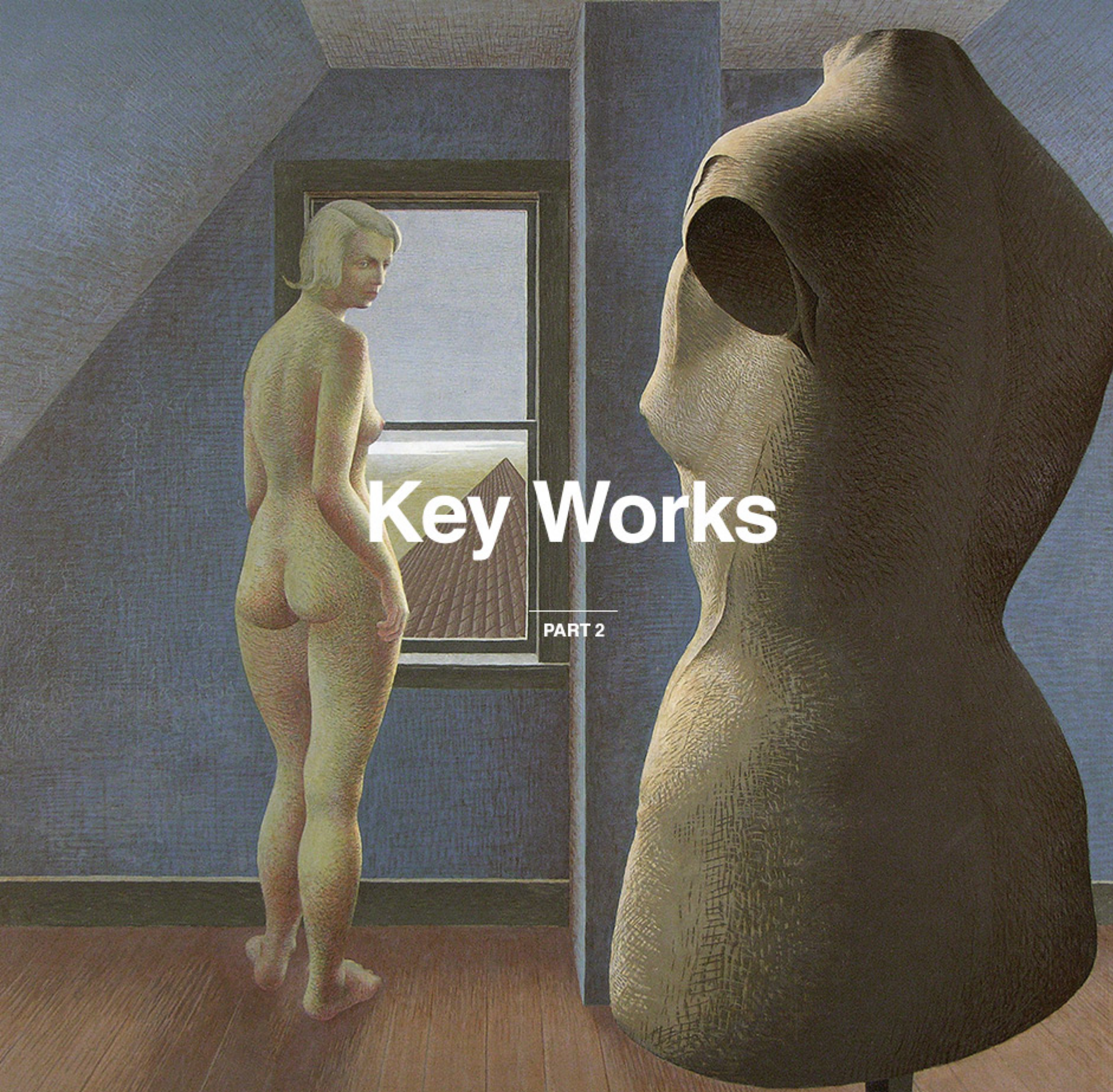
Alex Colville's career spanned over seventy years and comprised hundreds of works. Consistent in his dedication to figuration and allegorical compositions, Colville kept returning to the same major themes: family life, desire, individual will, and relationships between men and women, humans and animals, nature and the machine, and, above all, order and chaos. This selection of Colville's works illuminates the path of his artistic development, resulting in images that have filtered into the collective imagination of the Canadian public.

Infantry, Near Nijmegen, Holland 1946

Alex Colville, *Infantry, Near Nijmegen, Holland*, 1946
Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 121.9 cm
Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa

Colville's early work was produced while he served as an official war artist in the Second World War. Having gone straight from being a student at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, to joining the army, Colville did not think that his production during the war years really reflected his eventual development as an artist. He has been widely quoted as feeling that he didn't make his first mature work until 1950, four years after painting this image from sketches completed in 1945. However, this painting foreshadows many concerns seen in his more mature work.

The composition, for instance, reflects the geometric obsessions of Colville's later work, with a strong diagonal form cutting across the canvas, from upper left to lower right of the picture plane. Canadian soldiers walking through the mire of the Scheldt estuary in Holland are depicted as a series of plodding figures receding into the background, their collective weight seeming to push the figure in the foreground from his position in the lower right-hand corner out into our view. Colville has adopted the viewpoint of the next man ahead in line, looking back as he negotiates a gentle turn indicated by the water-filled furrow that parallels their marching path.

Gently curving diagonal lines often appear in Colville's compositions, such as *Horse and Train*, 1954, *Soldier and Girl at Station*, 1953, *West Brooklyn Road*, 1996, and *Traveller*, 1992. This technique breaks up the rigid geometry of the composition, introducing an element of softness to the hard lines that underlie all of Colville's images. Painted in Ottawa after his return from overseas, this is a composite image: the hands of the lead figure were based on the artist's own, while the face was based on that of his father: "I thought of my father as a kind of a corporal," Colville said.[1]

Along with *Infantry, Near Nijmegen*, the Canadian War Museum holds in its collection of Second World War art hundreds of paintings, drawings, and watercolours by Colville. While this work lacks the drama of *Horse and Train* and others of the 1950s, it contains the seeds of Colville's concern with the place of humans in a shattered world. These figures proceed by force of will—set in motion by the orders of others but sustained only through their own individual agency.

Alex Colville, *Infantry*, 1945, pencil on paper, 19 x 22.6 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa. The preliminary work is one of seventeen sketches in the Canadian War Museum associated with *Infantry, Near Nijmegen, Holland*, depicting Royal Winnipeg Rifles marching along a Dutch road.

Nude and Dummy 1950
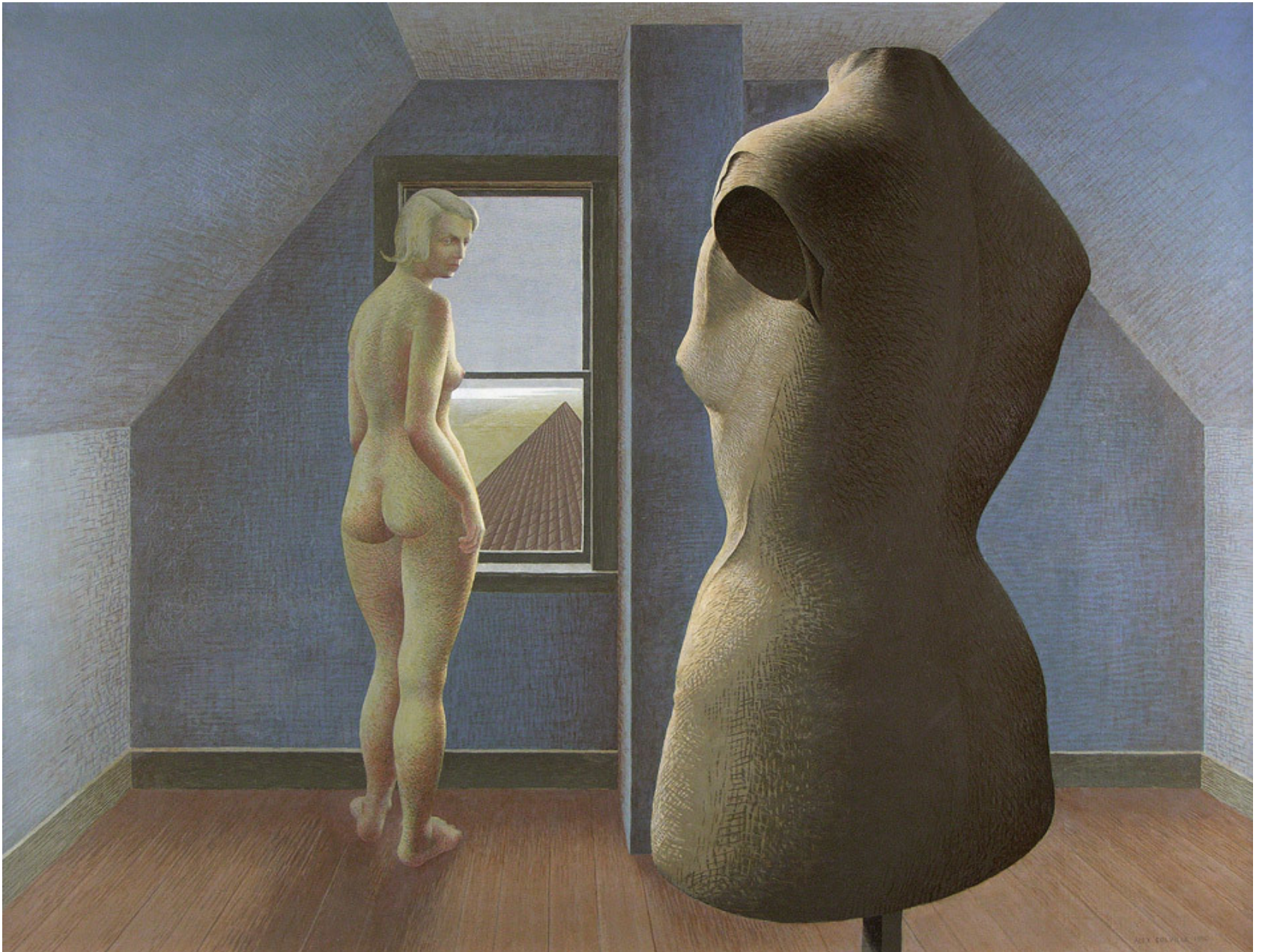
Alex Colville, *Nude and Dummy*, 1950
Glazed gum arabic emulsion on board, 60.9 x 81.2 cm
New Brunswick Museum, Saint John

Nude and Dummy was the first of Colville's paintings to use the perspectival system that became his signature technique. Here, the painting's elements are placed according to an underlying, meticulously constructed geometric skeleton rather than the more ad hoc and Impressionistic style he had learned at school and employed in much of his war art. It was also one of his first paintings sold to a museum (the New Brunswick Museum, Saint John), and the first sale of what he considered his mature work. To Colville, this marked his emergence as a serious artist: "I was therefore thirty years old before I did anything worthwhile."[1] Art historian Helen J. Dow, responding to this comment, writes, "This judgement is not based on the fact that he now received public recognition. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of his awareness of the mature handling of design and the sure understanding of the relationship between form and space achieved for the first time in this painting."[2]

Alex Colville, *Study for Nude and Dummy*, 1950, ink and watercolour on paper, 30.5 x 40.6 cm, Galerie d'art Louise-et-Reuben-Cohen, Université de Moncton.

The scene in *Nude and Dummy* is situated in an attic (the attic studio in Colville's Sackville home), one strangely denuded of any objects except the lone female figure and a dressmaker's dummy. Standing at the window, the nude woman looks back over her shoulder. She could be looking at the dummy or the artist (or his stand-in, us, the viewers). Her line of sight encompasses both.

The dummy is the disruptive element in this scene, a representation of the woman in the painting, yet a fragmented one, lacking head, arms, and lower body. It can be read as a mutilated body, adding a darker element to the work. That certainly has been the case in reviews of later work by the artist. In 1992 critic Shane Nakoneshny noted that "the women in [Colville's] work (and some men) are often denied subjectivity, and their faces and hands are concealed."[3] While one might be tempted to read this work as an essay in the objectification of women, the cool look over the figure's shoulder undermines any sense of her objectification.

This image demonstrates Colville's interest in imbuing the everyday with heightened symbolic content, pairing a human figure with an object standing in for the figure—a binary relationship that would come to define his mature work. He was intrigued by the religious iconography of early European painting, when artists could expect their audiences to know the allegorical implications of a particular martyrdom or other scene from the Bible.[4] As literary theorist Northrop Frye (1912–1991) so eloquently expressed it, the Bible was the "great code," a common storehouse of ideas, symbols, and allusions.[5]

In this and other Colville works of the 1950s one might perceive hints of his European counterparts in the Surrealist movement, such as René Magritte (1898–1967) or even Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), but Colville never admitted to such influences, if they existed. Rather, he stressed that he was seeking to avoid influence.[6] Colville sets up a conversation in this image, a back and forth that refuses easy categorization or simple conclusion.

Three Girls on a Wharf 1953

Alex Colville, *Three Girls on a Wharf***, 1953**
**Glazed casein tempera on Masonite, 41.1 x 25.4 cm**
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax

Three Girls on a Wharf points to where Colville's work ultimately evolves, toward subjects grounded in recognizable locations from his life, but imbued with a sense of history and import that belie their seemingly humble origins. This is a departure from other early works such as *Four Figures on Wharf*, 1952, *Coastal Figure*, 1951, or *Nudes on Shore*, 1950, that show figures inspired by Henry Moore (1898–1986) in featureless landscapes with overtly Surrealist overtones.

Here, three figures are displayed in a shallow rectangular box, enclosed on all sides by the wharf structure. The strict geometry creates a feeling of intense focus despite the slice of sky and horizon visible in the top right-hand corner of the painting. This work, which ostensibly shows three young women undressing to go swimming, has a feeling of an impromptu skinny dip, at least until one notices that the figure deepest in the composition is wearing a bathing cap. It is a planned swim, then, and a planned forgoing of swimsuits. These young women are portrayed as they remove their clothes, each one more advanced in her disrobing. Our vantage is from farther down the wharf, as if we were one of the group, standing and observing this scene that has unmistakable overtones of a ritual. There is nothing prurient here; rather, it is as if we have been privileged with a glimpse into the private lives of these girls. Yet their simple swim is freighted with symbolic import.

Three Girls on a Wharf shows Colville's debt to Renaissance painters. The artist has often been quoted saying he spent years processing what he had seen in a few days' visit to the Louvre at the end of his service in the Second World War.[1] The influences of Masaccio (1401–1428) and Paolo Uccello (1397–1475) are particularly clear in this exquisite panel. "Colville's work is filled with visual and verbal allusions that affirm the value of past art and continuity with his own," notes critic Jeffrey Meyers. "*Three Girls on a Wharf* echoes the iconography of the Three Graces and the Judgement of Paris."[2]

Colville's composition adopts a conventional depiction of the Three Graces (Aglaia, representing elegance and splendour; Thalia, representing youth, beauty, and cheerfulness; and Euphrosyne, representing mirth and joyfulness). This subject was popular throughout the history of Western painting, as it permitted the painter to present the nude female form in the round— showing the nude figure from the front, the rear, and the side. This sculptural effect was
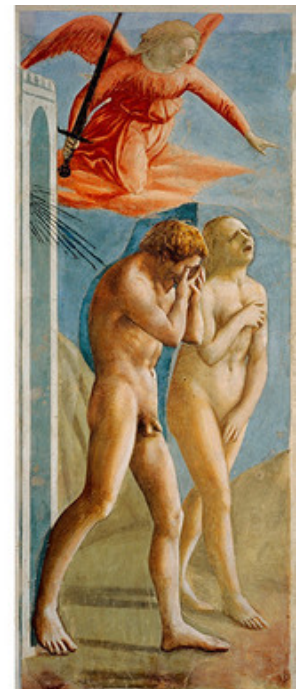
LEFT: Raphael, *The Three Graces*, c. 1504, oil on panel painting, 17 x 17 cm, Musée Condé, Chantilly.
RIGHT: Masaccio, *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, c. 1426–28 (altered in 1680, restored in 1980), fresco, 208 x 88 cm, Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.

used to overcome, at least partially, the single viewpoint mandated by the nature of a flat representation in two dimensions. The Three Graces, with their accompanying attributions, reflect the beauty and promise of youth—as do the girls caught in their preparations for their swim.

Horse and Train 1954

Alex Colville, *Horse and Train*, 1954
Casein tempera on hardboard, 41.2 x 54.2 cm
Art Gallery of Hamilton

Colville's *Horse and Train* is among the most recognizable images in Canadian art and encapsulates much of what is unique about his practice. The clashing binaries of nature and machine, order and chaos, the waking world and the world of nightmares, are all at play in this simple, iconic image. It is tempting to view this small panel as a response to Surrealism, with its jarring juxtapositions, but *Horse and Train* had its genesis in a poem by South African writer Roy Campbell (1901–1957):

> I scorn the goose-step of their massed attack
> And fight with my guitar slung on my back,
> Against a regiment I oppose a brain
> And a dark horse against an armoured train.[1]

Alex Colville, *Study for Horse and Train*, 1954, black ink on paper, 27.2 x 16.6 cm, private collection. Colville inscribed a line from Roy Campbell's poem "Dedication to Mary Campbell" (1949) in this drawing: "a dark horse against an armoured train."

Campbell toured North America in 1953, including a reading stop at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, where Colville met the poet. A March 1954 sheet of sketches with preparatory images for this painting includes Colville's notation of these lines.

By 1954 Colville had yet to arrive at one consistently used medium. Some paintings from this period are in oils, most in tempera. This work, in casein tempera, displays Colville's signature pointillist style, with its surface composed of thousands of tiny strokes of pure, albeit muted, colour. The glazed surface captures light, creating an atmospheric effect of depth in a painting completely without surface texture.

The moment depicted is frozen at its point of greatest tension. The train enters a curve just seconds before its light illuminates the dark horse. This moment clearly derives from Colville's imagination, as no horse would willingly run on railroad tracks—the surface of gravel between wooden ties is too treacherous.

As with Campbell's poem, this image contrasts an individual against the mechanized weight of progress—a bleak prospect, as Colville knew all too well from his wartime service. One of the most common sights on the Second World War battlefield were dead and dying pack animals that the armies used to haul supplies and artillery, which Colville depicted in his wartime sketches such as *Sketch Drawing, A Dead Horse*, 1945. Hopeless or not, Colville has placed individual will in opposition to collective, historical, mechanical inevitability.

This is a deeply romantic painting, depicting a charge into oblivion, but it is also thoughtful. In the 1950s Colville was reading existential philosophy; he was well aware of the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and Albert Camus (1913–1960), among others, and the idea that individual human will maintained its agency through opposition or rebellion was not unfamiliar to thoughtful artists of the day. *Horse and Train* has many possible readings. Perhaps it is a metaphor for human life, with the horse representing the individual, the tracks time, and the train death. Perhaps it is a lament about the world's mechanization and its doleful effects on nature. As curator David Burnett observes, differing readings do not alter the painting's impact: "One way of thinking of a dark horse does not preclude others…. And all readings (viewings) are poetically sharpened by the natural shock and surprise of the image."[2]

Alex Colville, *Sketch Drawing, A Dead Horse*, 1945, coloured pencil on paper, 27.4 x 35.8 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa. This sketch was completed near Sonsbeck, Germany, on March 7, 1945.

To Prince Edward Island 1965

Alex Colville, *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965
Acrylic emulsion on Masonite, 61.9 x 92.5 cm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Colville's most iconic imagery has the power to seem ubiquitous. This painting has become almost as familiar an image to Canadians as *Horse and Train*, 1954, yet it has none of the overt drama or dream-like qualities of the earlier work. The scene of *To Prince Edward Island* is situated on the top deck of a P.E.I. ferry, where a woman looks directly out at the viewer through a pair of binoculars while a man sits behind her, his face obscured by her body. Much as in *Woman in Bathtub*, 1973, the female figure is the centrepiece of the composition while the male figure hovers in the background. However, the woman on the ferry is fully engaged in looking, at either their shared destination or their point of departure.

Colville situated this painting as a contrast between what he describes as "the searching vision of the female" and the "stupid and passive" approach of the male gaze: "The woman sees, I suppose, and the man does not."[1] As can be seen in a work from 2001, *Surveyor*, the act of perceiving is a constant theme in Colville's work. In *To Prince Edward Island* that theme is joined with another of his common themes: the relationships between men and women, particularly husband and wife.

Alex Colville, *Surveyor*, 2001, acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 36 x 62.3 cm, collection of Sprott Securities, Toronto.

To Prince Edward Island encapsulates much of what makes Colville's work both idiosyncratic and universal. Colville's pictures are not sequential narratives, though they often feel as if they are segments of a story, nor are they reasoned arguments. They are deeply conceptual: ideas made whole as self-contained images.

Each individual is always an observer—that is inescapable for Colville. In this picture the artist observes the woman in her act of watching, and we, as viewers, are the observed even as we look at the painting and try to make sense of it. In Colville's world, seeing is the only route to knowing.

Colville directly addresses the viewer in this painting in a way that generates unease and fascination. The female figure appears to be looking back at us as we gaze at her, but the blank eye pieces of the binoculars put the lie to that self-deception. She regards the horizon, scanning the distance—looking right through us. The contradiction between what is (a flat arrangement of coloured pigments on a board) and what we want to see (a woman and man on a boat) is presented to us—you cannot truly know anyone, Colville seems to be saying, we are alone, together.

Centennial Coins 1967

Alex Colville, Centennial Coins, 1967
LEFT: *Colville Mackerel 6066 (Dime)*, **2013**
Pigment print flush mounted to archival board, 40 x 40 cm
Stephen Bulger Gallery, photograph by William Eakin

RIGHT: *Colville Wolf 6275 (Half Dollar)*, **2013**
Pigment print flush mounted to archival board, 40 x 40 cm
Stephen Bulger Gallery, photograph by William Eakin

"I do not find life boring or banal. Consequently I am not in flight from what might be called ordinary experience," Colville said.[1] What could be more ordinary than pocket change, and what series of artworks have had the reach of Colville's centennial coins, which for decades showed up regularly in Canadians' change purses and wallets. The six coins that made up the series—depicting a Canada Goose (one dollar), a wolf (fifty cent), a wildcat (twenty-five cent), a mackerel (ten cent), a rabbit (five cent), and a dove (one cent)—can be thought of as the largest-edition Canadian artwork ever made and the most widely disseminated.

In 1965 Colville submitted designs for centennial coins, following a call from the Royal Canadian Mint in celebration of Canada's 100th anniversary of Confederation. The mint, which had requested submissions from several artists, was so taken with Colville's simple designs of common Canadian animals that he won the commission for the entire set. Colville, whose first introduction to art as a teenager involved carving and drawing,[2] made the most of the shallow relief format of the coins to exploit the sculptural qualities so apparent in his work by the mid-1960s. His painted images have a weighty solidity despite their essential flatness, and one can easily see how they would translate well to the shallow-relief forms of coins and medallions.

He chose animals because, as he wrote in a statement for the mint, "It is a question of finding images which are worthy and appropriate for use in celebrating our country's Centennial, images which will express not merely some particular time, place, or event, but a whole century of Canada, and even more; natural creatures provide this enduring and meaningful continuum."[3] Animals were a staple in Colville's mature work, from the horses and dogs of works such as *Horse and Train*, 1954, and *Child and Dog*, 1952, and he consistently included cows, sheep, crows, and other animals until his death. He said of his use of animals, "To me the presence of animals seems absolutely necessary. I feel that without animals everything is incomplete."[4]

Alex Colville, *Child and Dog*, 1952, glazed tempera on Masonite, 80.9 x 60.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Pacific 1967
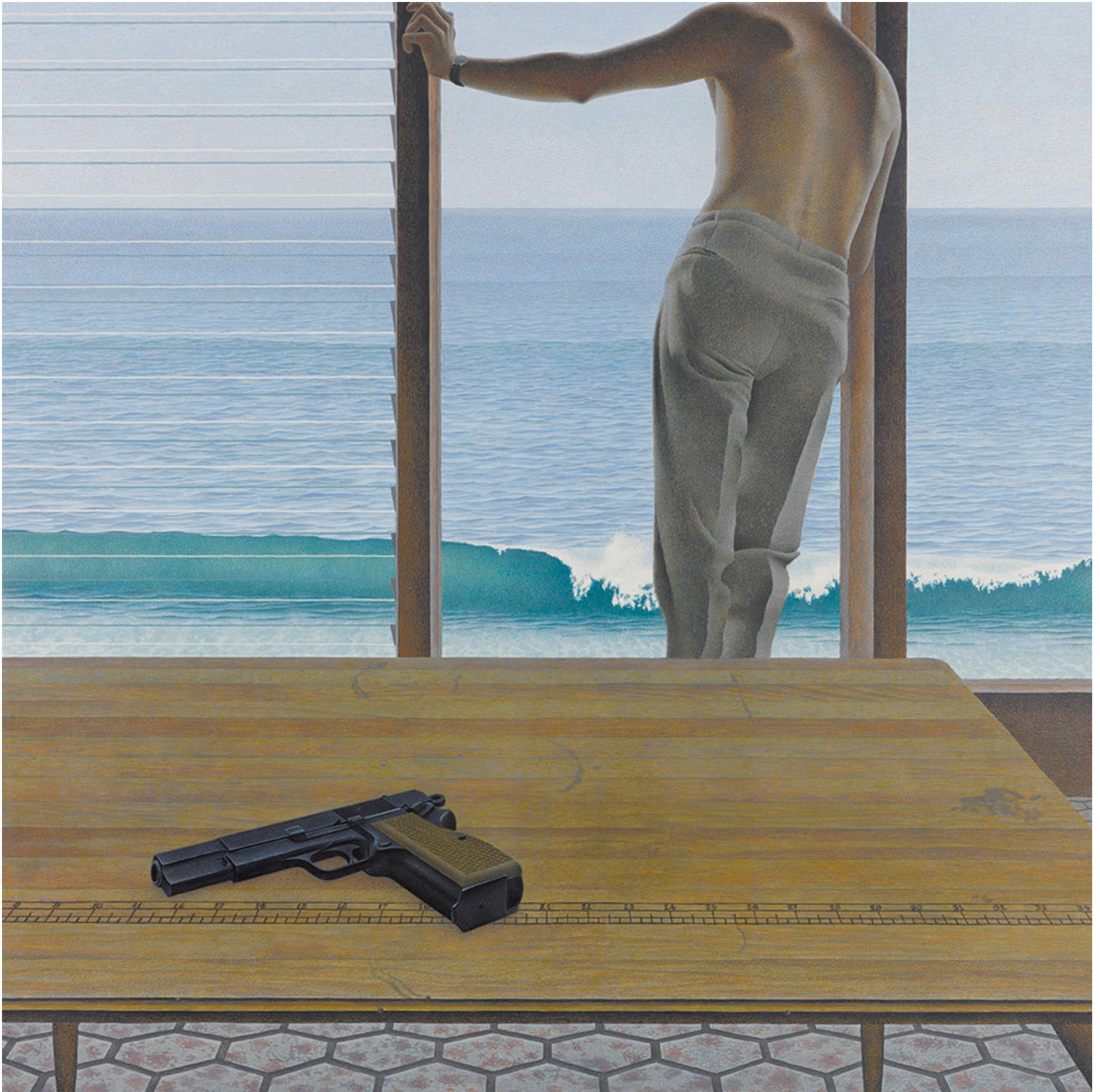
Alex Colville, *Pacific*, 1967
Acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 53.3 x 53.3 cm
Private collection

This evocative image is one of Colville's most overtly dramatic paintings since *Horse and Train*, 1954. It is one of few paintings by the artist depicting a land- or seascape that isn't "home," whether the environs of Sackville, New Brunswick, or Wolfville, Nova Scotia. Colville finished painting the scene during a six-month teaching position in Santa Cruz, California. It is simple yet powerful: a male figure looks out over an ocean, and a handgun lies on a wooden table that has a ruler embossed along one side.

Like almost all of Colville's work since *Nude and Dummy*, 1950, this painting is based upon a detailed skeleton of geometry; no component is placed randomly or as simply a reflection of observation. Two key elements were of great importance to Colville: the sewing table had belonged to his mother and the pistol was his Second World War service-issue revolver. Colville constructed the image from various elements of his memory and experience, from sketches brought with him, and perhaps even from photographs. The foreboding presence of the handgun creates most of the tension in the work. The figure seems relaxed, the ocean is not particularly menacing, and there is nothing else in the room to add to or detract from the tension.

Colville was much influenced by French existentialism in the 1950s and 1960s, as were so many artists and thinkers of his generation. The works of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and Albert Camus (1913–1960) were particularly impactful. "It seemed enormously significant in a way I don't think anyone could comprehend today," he remarked.[1] In formulating a moral and ethical response to the war, postwar thought was fraught with tension and trauma. Why should one not kill oneself in a world emptied of certainty and morality? Suicide was presented as a supreme act of will, if ultimately a futile one.

In *Pacific*, Colville creates an image of this moral dilemma, though the painting may represent a decision, as the turned-away figure implies a rejection. This may be a pause or a moment of reflection—"pacific" after all, means "peaceful"—and that is certainly one possible reading. Colville himself said, "I don't think the painting is about suicide, I guess I think of the gun and the table as necessary parts of human life, upon which it is possible sometimes to turn one's back."[2] Art historian Helen J. Dow reads the gun and the table with its built-in measuring rod as symbolizing justice—the sword and scales substituted by more prosaic emblems.[3] Writer Hans Werner quotes Colville, agreeing with Dow's interpretation and further reflecting on the use of the pistol as a meditation on power: "The use of power, [Colville] says, is a key moral and philosophical problem, and that's what his paintings featuring pistols are about."[4]
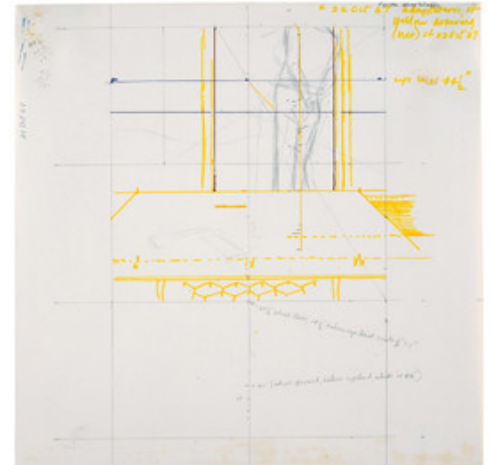
Alex Colville, *Sketch No. 11 for Pacific*, 1967, graphite and coloured felt pen on wove paper, 22.9 x 30 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Still from the film *Heat* (1995), directed by Michael Mann. Reproduced by permission from Monarchy Enterprises, BV & Regency Entertainment (USA), Inc. This scene is a nod to Colville's 1967 painting. Focusing the camera's attention on the gun placed on the table, this cinematographic quotation directs us to themes of psychological alienation and moral tension in the film.

Whether this image is one of indecision or certainty, hope or despair, can only be decided by the viewer.

Refrigerator 1977

Alex Colville, *Refrigerator*, 1977
Acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 120 x 74 cm
Private collection

In 1970s Canada, Colville's most controversial work, *Refrigerator*, shocked with its frank depiction of a nude, middle-aged couple. As art historian Mark Cheetham writes, "For some viewers, this 'familiarity' is taken too far, and Colville has been criticized for the nudity here (apparently they are more concerned with male than female nudity, an ancient tradition in art)."[1] Even today, the full-frontal nudity of the image is screened out by the filters of most internet search engines. It remains inappropriate, apparently, forty years after its creation.

The painting depicts a nude couple in a dark kitchen standing around their fridge. The man drinks a glass of milk; the woman is at the open door, as if considering her options. Three cats gather at their feet, hoping for some food or drink, or merely attention. Historically in Western painting, the female nude is ubiquitous. However, the full-frontal male nude, without the convenient fig leaf familiar from early depictions of Adam and Eve, is decidedly less so. Here Colville presents a domestic scene that, despite its Adam-and-Eve allusions, is distinctly contemporary.

As with all of Colville's images this one lacks extraneous detail—no notes or drawings on the refrigerator door, no use of the fridge-top for storage. The female figure stands naturally, one hand holding the door open. The male stands beside the fridge with his arm draped across the top of it, facing the viewer. Even for a tall man, this would be an uncomfortable pose, and he would have to be more than two metres tall to manage such a contortion.[2] But the image feels right, despite its physical incongruities.

The man's pose is not from life, but from compositional necessity. His outstretched arm visually links with the woman's head, and the cats create a horizontal line across the bottom of the picture, leading to the male figure, which completes the "frame" on the right-hand side. The rectangle created by the bodies mimics that of the refrigerator, the glowing "hearth" around which this domestic scene centres.

The relationship between husbands and wives is a constant theme in Colville's painting, with those figures almost always depicting himself and his wife, Rhoda. Here the figures are self-sufficient, but necessary to each other—the feeling of ease would be lacking without one of the human figures. The contorted male pose only seems normal in the context of the compositional balancing of the female figure. That the woman provides the stability is no surprise, given Colville's body of work—as with *After Swimming*, 1955, the female figure is the anchor, while the male figure is off-balance, steadied only by his relation to the female.

Albrecht Dürer, *Adam and Eve*, 1504, engraving on laid paper, 24.6 x 19.3 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Woman in Bathtub 1973

Alex Colville, *Woman in Bathtub*, 1973
Acrylic polymer emulsion on particleboard, 87.8 x 87.6 cm
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

This is one of Colville's most disturbing images. Of the many scenes the artist depicted using himself and his wife, Rhoda, as models, *Woman in Bathtub* stands out as one that explores the darker and more disquieting side of male/female relationships. Although the woman is in a vulnerable position, and the man is in one of authority, the sense of menace comes from our reading of the painting, not the image itself.

The female figure seems awkward and somehow imbalanced, as if she is about to rise or shift her position. The male figure, conversely, is very at ease, clad in a dressing gown, one hand in his pocket, exuding comfort and a sense of place, of ownership. Though this image depicts the artist and his wife, paintings are not biography, and viewers can only deal with what they see: a nude woman hunched over in the bath; an anonymous man looming over her left shoulder; and a room stripped of any identifying clues and with no domestic clutter, not even a towel—just cool porcelain.

The relationship between men and women is a common theme in Colville's work. He used images of himself and Rhoda in domestic settings to make powerful, complicated paintings that speak to fundamental truths and mysteries of human connection. How can we know anyone, even the person we have lived with for decades? From his first serigraph, *After Swimming*, 1955, to one of his last paintings, *Living Room*, 1999–2000, each depiction of that relationship is a visual manifestation of the notion of "two becoming one." Additionally, the two figures are often shown at contrasting poles of behaviour: the male as outward-focused, the female closer to nature or the body's realities.

Alex Colville, *Living Room*, 1999–2000, acrylic on Masonite, 41.8 x 58.5 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

The juxtaposition of nude female and clothed male figures in painting has a long history, from religious paintings such as depictions of Susanna and the Elders; to artworks based on myths, such as the Judgement of Paris, or legends, such as the Rape of the Sabine Women; through to modern works, such as *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1862–63, by Édouard Manet (1832–1883). Perhaps the most common composition depicts the artist and his model—a reflection on artistic inspiration and on power relationships, with the male creator viewing the object that inspires his creation.

Jacopo Robusti, known as Tintoretto, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1555–56, 147 x 194 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

Édouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass* (*Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*), 1862–63, oil on canvas, 208 x 264.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Colville's layered imagery, with its ability to seem filmic despite being static and singular, is well displayed in this painting. A disconcerting feeling of incipient threat permeates this work, while it remains a simple domestic scene. Colville presents a moment when the few facts, innocent enough on the surface, can induce an ill-defined sense of fear. This sense of impending doom reflects Colville's view of human life as fundamentally tragic. As he once said, "I see life as inherently dangerous. I have an essentially dark view of the world and human affairs."[1]

Black Cat 1996

Alex Colville, *Black Cat*, 1996
Serigraph on paper, edition of 70, 36 x 36 cm
Owens Art Gallery, Mount Allison University, Sackville

A process in which he was self-taught and which he did on his own, never working with printers, serigraphs were an important part of Colville's practice.[1] Prints were a way of reaching a larger audience and presented a set of physical and intellectual challenges that were different from painting and demanding in their own way. "I think there is always a tendency for the print to be directed to a wider public," he observed.[2]

Black Cat, a relatively late print, is remarkable for integrating several themes important to Colville: the role of the artist, the dichotomy between human and animal worlds, and the precariousness of order in the face of time and chaos. In composition the painting reprises *Target Pistol and Man*, 1980, which positions the artist in a near-identical setting. Perhaps more than any other of Colville's works, *Black Cat* addresses his use of geometry to create order and evoke the inherent fragility of that construction.

As an artist who uses his immediate surroundings, in particular his home and family, as a source of his imagery, it is not surprising that Colville also employs the genre of self-portrait. However, most often Colville, like his wife, Rhoda, or his daughter, Ann, appears to be a character more than a precise representation of himself. The male figures in *Ship and Observer*, 2007, or *Kiss with Honda*, 1989, for instance, are both based on Colville but not in self-observation or self-scrutiny. *Black Cat*, however, differs as a more traditional method of self-portraiture.

Alex Colville, *Target Pistol and Man*, 1980, acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 60 x 60 cm, private collection.

In this work the artist looks directly at the viewer, the lower half of his face obscured by a cat toying with a triangular ruler in front of him on a table. Animals in Colville's paintings and prints serve as a foil to humans, as seen in an earlier serigraph, *Cat and Artist*, 1979, and in paintings such as *Dog in Car*, 1999, and *Headstand*, 1982, among many other examples. They do not strive for meaning or seek answers. As author Tom Smart observes, for Colville, "the cat is the emblem of unknowing."[3] The ruler may be the focal point of the composition, but for the black cat, its function is irrelevant; it is an object to play with. The cat's complete otherness undermines the underlying web of geometry that holds this, and every, Colville image together—

Alex Colville, *Dog in Car*, 1999, acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 36 x 62.4 cm, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

order is simply irrelevant in the cat's world. But for the artist, that geometry symbolized by the ruler is a device for creating order out of chaos, certainty out of mystery, and knowledge out of ignorance.

West Brooklyn Road 1996

Alex Colville, *West Brooklyn Road*, 1996
Acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 40 x 56.5 cm
Private collection

Colville always sought the universal in the particular. In *West Brooklyn Road* he took an element from his day-to-day life and used it to build an image of startling power and symbolic impact. The scene is on Nova Scotia Highway 101, on what was then the first overpass between Hantsport and Wolfville. For years, an intellectually impaired man, Freddie Wilson, waved to drivers as they began the long turn into the Annapolis Valley.[1]

In *West Brooklyn Road*, though, the waver is not Wilson, but the artist. As such Colville presents an image of himself as a simple outsider watching the passing pageant of life. It is a self-deprecating image, unusual in Colville's oeuvre, but one that reveals an important thread in his work—the self-knowledge of a man always aware of his personal ephemerality and refusing to take himself too seriously.

The viewpoint in this work is a common one in Colville's paintings of the 1990s and later —that of a car driver or passenger. The scene also is fragmented, with the figure on the overpass looming impossibly large compared to the tractor-trailer in the oncoming lane. Colville reproduces the process of driving at speed: as viewers we note the oncoming truck, return our eyes to the road, then note the figure on the overpass. In the ensuing seconds the distances would have changed, but our impressions remain what they were when we first noticed the truck.

This work is reminiscent of another iconic Canadian painting, *401 Towards London No. 1*, 1968–69, by Jack Chambers (1931–1978). Chambers positions the viewer at an overpass, looking down the highway as a large truck pulls away in the distance. The fixed perspective gives the painting its solidity. In contrast, Colville situates the vantage point from a moving vehicle, lending a feeling of slippage that undermines any sense of stability.

Colville isn't portraying narrative time here. This image freezes a moment, one of comprehension and recognition. Each component—the overpass, the figure, the truck, the bay and horizon, the road snaking before our eyes—coalesces in a point outside of normal time, the instant when our brain catches up with our eyes. Clarity happens in our mind, not in the world.

Jack Chambers, *401 Towards London No. 1*, 1968–69, oil on wood, 183 x 244 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Studio 2000
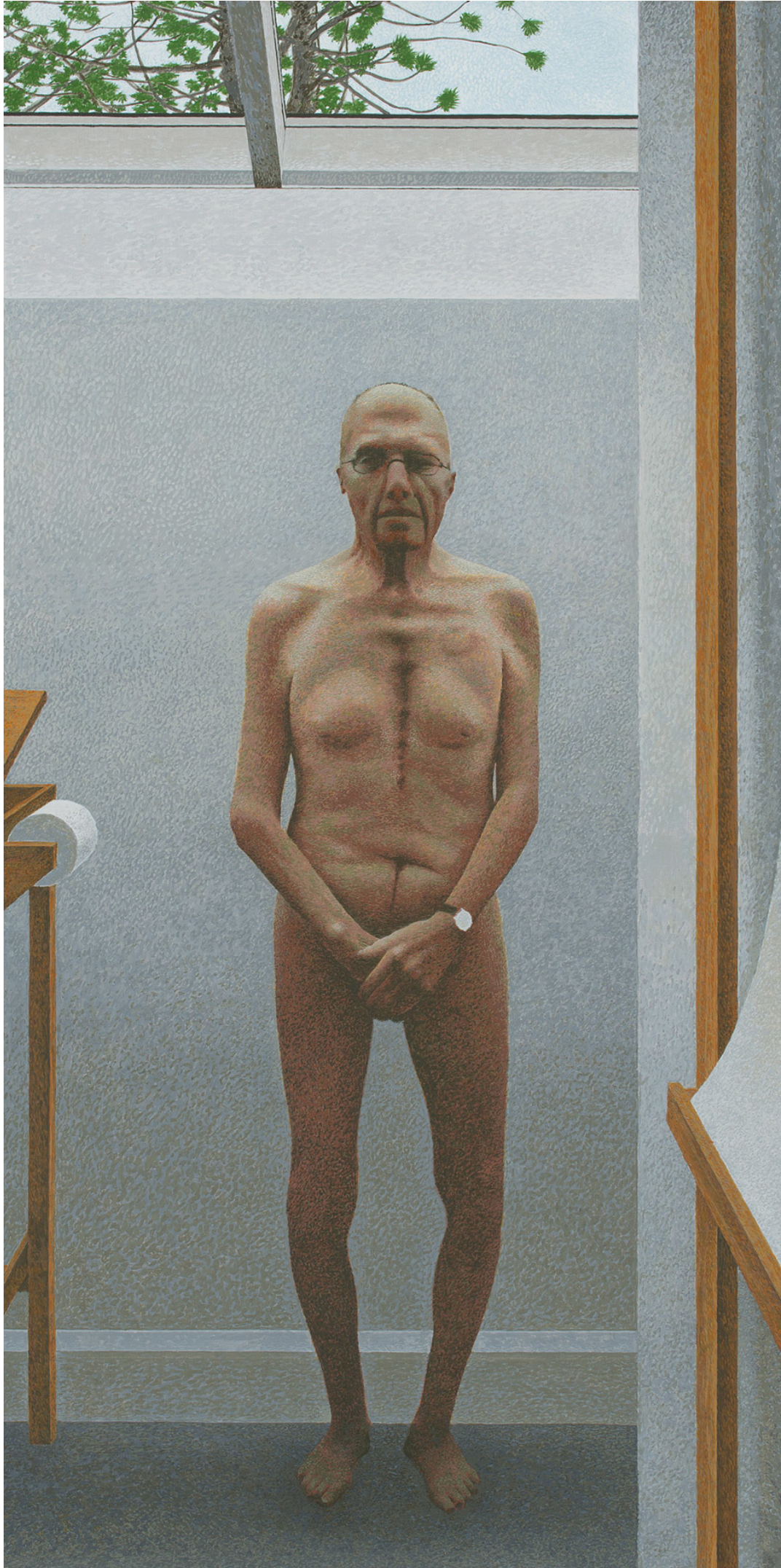
Alex Colville, *Studio*, 2000
Acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 66 x 33 cm
Private collection

Colville's most stark and uncompromising self-portrait, *Studio* presents the artist in full length, standing naked before the viewer, his hands clasped over his genitals. Colville exposes himself to our scrutiny, but really it is he who is the observer. Painted from an image in a full-length mirror, this work is an unstinting self-examination by an artist who takes observation to great lengths.

Colville created numerous self-portraits, such as *Target Pistol and Man*, 1980, and *Black Cat*, 1996, but *Studio* is the only one presented without props, such as a pistol, ruler, or animal. This work is unequalled in Colville's oeuvre for its physical honesty and directness. It also has an element of appraisal, a sense of summing up, as the artist entered the last productive decade of his life and career. In part, the image contains the truth of what the studio is for any real artist: the place where the self is stripped bare and ideas are pushed to their limits, no matter how exposed or naked the artist may feel. *Studio* suggests that the artist is always the way he presents himself in the painting: under scrutiny, naked, and helpless under the eyes of his observers.

But there is no sense of assumed victimhood nor self-pity in this painting. It is strong, almost harsh, and unflinchingly honest. When the writer Robert Fulford asked Colville why he presented himself here as so much older than he appeared at the time, the artist was characteristically direct: it was because he was alone. "When one is alone, and not in conversation, one tends to look older, more melancholy…."[1]

Alex Colville, *Artist and Car*, 2008, acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 26.7 x 42.3 cm, private collection.

Colville presents an image of an elderly man with a scar, from major surgery on his heart. Autonomy, free will, and agency are all vital elements in the world view expressed in Colville's painting, and aging and illness directly circumscribe those. The sick and elderly can progressively lose their autonomy, their ability to control their bodies and their lives. They become objects of care, the responsibility of others. That awareness, and an acceptance tinged with regret, infuses this painting, making it extremely uncomfortable to view.

This is not Colville's last self-portrait; he completed one eight years later, *Artist and Car*, 2008. But it is his best portrayal of the artist as creator and servant of art and the artist's process as he understood it. Artists are often asked how they come up with their ideas. Colville's *Studio* is, in part, an answer.

Significance & Critical Issues

Alex Colville's drive to make sense out of life—which marked his work from his return from the army in 1946 until his death in 2013—is at the heart of his significance as an artist. He was intent on creating a world of order from the reality of chaos, always aware of the essential and tragic fragility of this Sisyphean task. Colville was a thinker as much as a maker, and his sustained, rigorous approach to creating images is a remarkable legacy. At his death he was the best-known artist in Canada, and his body of work includes some of the most iconic images ever created in this country.

Influence of the War

Like so many men and women of his generation, Alex Colville felt a call to serve during the Second World War. He enlisted, hoping to be an official war artist, and after two years of training and general duties was so appointed. The Third Canadian Infantry Division was a veteran unit by the time the newly minted Second Lieutenant Alex Colville joined it. The division landed at Juno Beach on D-Day and fought its way down Normandy through Caen and Falaise. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery christened the unit the "Water Rats" during the Battle of the Scheldt in Belgium and the Netherlands, a nod to the Canadians' bravery and perseverance in terrible conditions and a reference to Montgomery's own "Desert Rats" who had driven the Germans out of North Africa. Colville's most successful painting of this time is *Infantry, Near Nijmegen, Holland*, 1946, a moving portrait of a line of infantrymen slogging through a flooded field—an image that well underlines Montgomery's point.

Alex Colville, *Tragic Landscape*, 1945, oil on canvas, 61 x 91 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa. "I remember the paratrooper lying in a [Deventer] field," recalled Colville in 1980. "He was about twenty. They [the Germans] would fight right to the very end; they had put up a tremendous fight until they were all killed."

While assigned to the Third Canadian Infantry Colville was exposed to the full horrors of war; not actual combat, though he was often close to action, but the horrific aftermath of full-scale mechanized war. Shattered villages, splintered forests, churned ground, and dead soldiers, civilians, and farm animals littered the landscape such that the sight of bodies became so common it must have seemed routine. Colville described his practice as a war artist as subjective. "You are not a camera," he said. "There is a certain subjectivity, an interpretive function."[1] In *A German Flare Goes Up*, 1944, Colville, close to action, records a river crossing by Canadian troops. Being exposed is also being at risk, and Colville depicts the tension of the moment through the rigidity of the soldier in the foreground and the overall emotional tenor of the work.

Alex Colville, *A German Flare Goes Up*, 1944, watercolour, ink, and carbon pencil on paper, 38.8 x 57.2 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

Colville's most important assignment during his time as a war artist was at the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Here, more than any other time in the twenty-five-year-old Colville's experience of war, he witnessed the full potential of human depravity, and the encounter was traumatic and lasting. He later said of it, "One felt badly because one didn't feel worse. That is, you see one dead person and it is bad: five hundred is not five hundred times worse. There is a point at which you begin to feel nothing. There must have been 35,000 bodies in that place and there were people dying all the time."[2] German philosopher Theodor Adorno famously wrote, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."[3] How does one continue to create poetry, or any art, after the despair and horror of what humans have done to one another? Is there any room for hope? For Colville, and many of his peers, the answer was a qualified "Yes." His experience of the war and its numbing effect profoundly impacted Colville's work, preparing him for the existentialist philosophy and the new approach to painting that he would explore in the 1950s. His sustained search for order was his way of coping with chaos, evident in such works as *Nude and Dummy*, 1950, *Four Figures on Wharf*, 1952, and *Woman, Man, and Boat*, 1952.

Alex Colville, *Bodies in a Grave, Belsen*, 1946, oil on canvas, 76.3 x 101.6 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

Colville working on his painting *Bodies in a Grave, Belsen*, 1946, collection of the Colville family.

Thinking as Painting

Alex Colville's work represents one of the most coherent bodies of painting in Canadian art history, a sustained look at basic philosophic issues that remained central to his practice from 1950 until his final painting in 2010.

In the early 1950s Colville turned to existential philosophy, and was much influenced by Albert Camus (1913–1960), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). All three questioned the state of human beings in the world, a world whose certainties had been undermined, seemingly forever, by the trauma of the two world wars. Their insistence that humans be viewed as free and responsible agents who express their freedom through acts of will was an immensely attractive assertion to a generation haunted by war. As Tom Smart wrote, "In artistic terms, existentialism sees art as an attempt to give the world the coherence, order and unity it lacks, and Colville was drawn to this structure."[4]

Colville, in his insistence on order, on making sense, echoes Camus's definition of a "metaphysical rebel" as one who "attacks a shattered world in order to demand unity from it."[5] Colville is a man in revolt against a world that promises only tragedy. "Rebellion is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition," Camus states. "But its blind impulse is to demand order in the midst of chaos and unity in the very heart of the ephemeral."[6] This demand is a key theme in Colville's work, most evident in such images as *Horse and Train*, 1954, *Skater*, 1964, or *Target Pistol and Man*, 1980. In each of these, and so many other works by Colville, the artist presents a situation in which order and chaos are equal possibilities: the horse and train may collide with catastrophic effect; the skater may lose her precarious balance and tumble to the ice; the man may pick up the pistol and use it. Colville posits moments of stasis in order to anchor us in a chaotic world. His rebellion lies in refusing to accept the eventual triumph of entropy and in seeking stability and endurance despite knowing they are ephemeral.
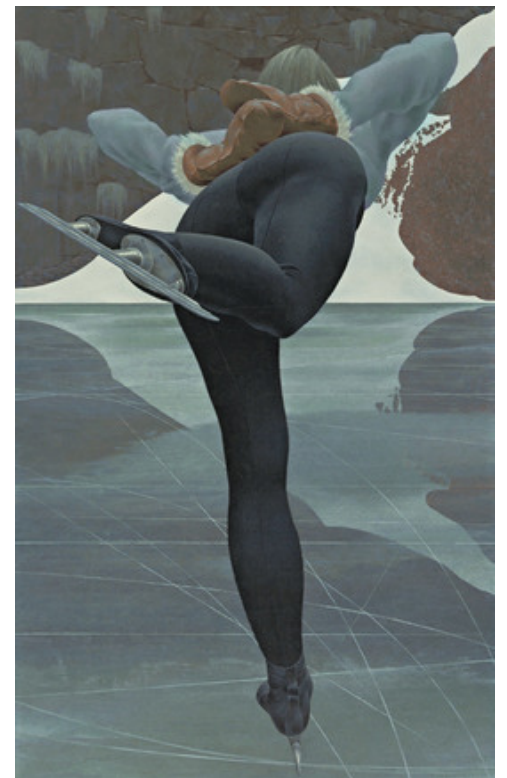
Alex Colville, *Skater*, 1964, synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 113 x 69.8 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Colville insisted throughout his career on order; he, too, opposed a brain against a regiment and "a dark horse against an armoured train."[7] His insistence on the rational underpinning of all his compositions, his focus on his immediate surroundings, was perhaps an attempt to use thought against the ever-encroaching nothingness of the abyss.

At a time when Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism were major influences on Canadian painters, Colville took his own path. Colville's intellectualism, his assertion that reason trumps passion, and his reliance on tradition in painting distinguished him from the mainstream of critically acclaimed Canadian painters. As journalist Robert Fulford noted in his 1983 profile of Colville, "We can most profitably see Colville within the context of Canada—not the Canadian art scene but the larger field of Canadian culture."[8] Fulford maintains that Colville should be considered part of the intellectual history of Canada, alongside such thinkers as George Grant (1918–1988) and Northrop Frye (1912–1991), with their own brand of conservative rebellion, more so than with his artistic peers of the period, such as Jack Bush (1909–1977), Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960), or Jean-Paul Riopelle (1923–2002).

Alex Colville, *Traveller*, 1992, acrylic polymer emulsion on board, 43.2 x 86.4 cm, Art Gallery of Hamilton.

A Personal Realism

Alex Colville eschewed abstraction at the height of its critical acclaim in North America. In Canada, the art scenes of the 1950s and 1960s were dominated by movements and groups influenced by or responding to Abstract Expressionism, such as the Automatistes, the Regina Five, and Painters Eleven. Colville was simultaneously an outlier and a success. He had his first solo show in New York in 1953, he represented Canada at the Venice Biennale in 1966, and he began exhibiting in Germany and Britain

in the late 1960s. He achieved this without being associated with the most influential art movements of the day: abstract art, Pop art, and Conceptual art.

LEFT: Jared French, *State Park*, 1946, tempera on composition board, 62.1 x 62.2 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. **RIGHT:** Alex Colville, *Couple on the Beach*, 1957, casein tempera on Masonite, 73.4 x 96.4 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Despite his early self-description as an artist whose work was based in ideas,[9] Colville has mostly been thought of as a realist, his work linked to numerous variations on the genre. In the 1950s he became associated with magic realism[10] because he showed in New York at the Hewitt Gallery, a noted dealer of self-styled American Magic Realists such as George Tooker (1920–2011) and Jared French (1905–1988). Somewhat later in his career, his work became the leading example of "Atlantic Realist" painters, a category with little stylistic meaning beyond the biographic realities of having lived in Atlantic Canada and studied at Mount Allison University. This term applies to some of Colville's Mount Allison students, most notably Christopher Pratt (b. 1935), Mary Pratt (b. 1935), Tom Forrestall (b. 1936), and their imitators.[11]

Colville has also been grouped with Photorealism, a style popular in the early 1970s and typified by artists such as Robert Bechtle (b. 1932) or Richard Estes (b. 1932), who recreate the visual effects of photography in their paintings. However, this is an awkward association given Colville's methods of working and his avowed interest in making a world, rather than depicting one in front of him. He often used photography as a tool, but never attempted to recreate photographic effects, unlike the paintings of such artists as Chuck Close (b. 1940) and Mary Pratt. In speaking of his relationship with photography Colville said, "Photographs tend not to give me the information that I want, and *do* give me the information that I *don't* want…I think this has also something to do with *memory*; it is important for me to be able to forget some things…the camera takes everything, forgets nothing."[12]

Colville is a representational painter, but his concern with creating images based on ideas about being human, his desire to make sense out of life, allies him as much with idealism as with realism of any stripe, and he doesn't fit easily into any convenient grouping. It is fair to think of him as a realist painter, but one whose peers are Lucian Freud (1922–2011), Balthus (1908–2001), Edward Hopper (1882–1967), or Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009). Freud's *Hotel Bedroom*, 1954, for instance, shares the psychological depth and tension of Colville's best work. Colville did not want to fool the eye—if anything he was trying to get us to see more deeply than we usually do. His *Dressing Room*, while thematically similar to the Freud painting at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, differs in some key respects: Colville depicts a woman at ease with herself and her power, one who lacks the sense of despair seen in the Freud. The pistol on her dressing table serves to heighten this sense of power and menace; the male figure in the background is left deliberately mysterious.

LEFT: Lucian Freud, *Hotel Bedroom*, 1954, oil on canvas, 91.1 x 61 cm, Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton. **RIGHT:** Alex Colville, *Dressing Room*, 2002, acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 56.5 x 40 cm, collection of Fox Harb'r Golf Resort & Spa.

Depicting the Everyday

"In a sense the things I show are moments in which everything seems perfect and something is revealed." —Alex Colville[13]

Colville's abiding interest in the nature of being led him to examine the everyday facts of existence. His subject matter is, almost exclusively, the daily life that surrounded him, whether that was in Sackville, Wolfville, or while he was on a sojourn in Santa Cruz or Berlin. For Colville, thinking deeply happens wherever you are, and happens best with familiar things. As art historian Martin Kemp notes, "He is a local painter in the sense that Constable was local, creating art that has to draw nourishment from scenes known intimately in order to find a wider truth."[14]

His approach is literary, as has been noted by such writers as Mark Cheetham and Robert Fulford. His interest in the everyday echoes that of a fiction writer such as Alice Munro (b. 1931): Colville constructs extraordinary images out of ordinary experience. He is a storyteller of sorts but without a message to deliver. Cheetham notes, "To suggest that Colville's images are imbued with narrative elements by viewers is not to claim that he narrates the scenes that he constructs. By the same token, though he is careful to depict only what he understands, not all that he shows is his experience. He creates fictions, just as the novelists that he admires do."[15] Colville was an inveterate consumer of fiction, particularly drawn to writers who were "realists" and who depicted day-to-day life in difficult times. Among his favourites were Ford Madox
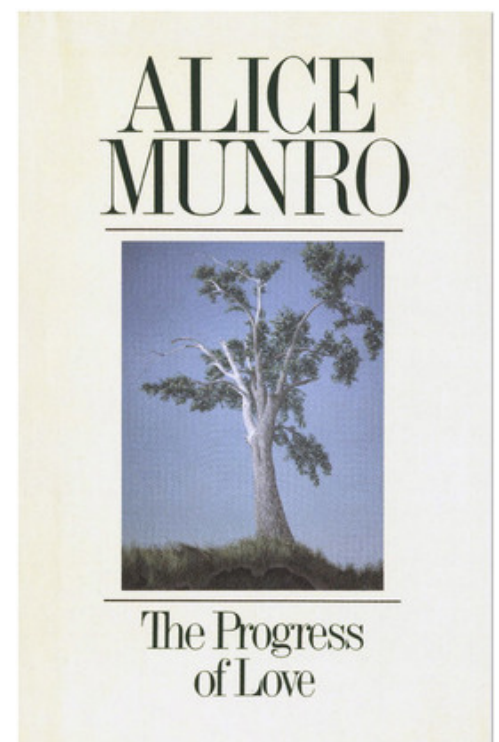
Cover of Alice Munro's *The Progress of Love* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986), featuring Alex Colville's painting *Elm Tree at Horton Landing*, 1956.

Ford (1873–1939), Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), Iris Murdoch (1919–1999), Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), John Dos Passos (1896–1970), Alice Munro, Thomas Mann (1875–1955), and Albert Camus (1913–1960).[16]

In Colville's depictions, simple binaries create complex images that resist easy summation. Humans and animals, men and women, humans and machines, the constructed world and the natural environment, are all put into play in his "fictions." He begins with ideas, and uses familiar objects to express them. According to Colville, "My paintings begin as imaginary drawings, and then at a later point in their development, I make some drawings from life, from reality. It's interesting that the original conception of one of my paintings, or my prints, always emerges out of my head, rather than from something specifically seen. It's a sort of conglomeration of experience and observation."[17]

Animals play a key role in Colville's work, often standing in as a counter to human figures. The animal is Other, present, seemingly ubiquitous in Colville's imagery, but essentially unknowable. As his daughter, Ann Kitz, told curator Andrew Hunter, "He wasn't sentimental about animals, but he thought that they were essentially good, and he didn't think that people were inherently good."[18] Colville uses animals as a compositional pairing—such as in *Dog and Groom*, 1991—that forms an essential binary in his work: human/animal or, perhaps more accurately, culture/nature. For Colville, humans think, animals act, and in their juxtaposition something important about the world can be expressed. As Hunter notes, "Colville's bond with animals (particularly the family dogs that appear in so many works) was genuine and consistently evident. He seemed to think both about and with them, to work toward understanding the world in tandem with them."[19]

Alex Colville, *Dog and Groom*, 1991, acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 62.4 x 72 cm, private collection.

For Colville, so influenced by existentialism and its restless pursuit for the meaning of human nature, animals provide a foil to further his philosophical engagement. As he stated early in his career: "The great task which North American artists have to perform is one of self-realization, but a self-realization much broader and deeper than the purely personal or subjective. The job thus involves answering such questions as, 'Who are we? What are we like? What do we do?'"[20] Colville posed these questions through the use of symbols: "I am suggesting that primeval myths may be of use to the modern painter.… What I have in mind is the use of material so old, so often used down through the ages, that it has become an integral part of human consciousness."[21]

Boats, for instance, can stand in for a journey—the increasing distance between a parent and child as the child grows up, as in *Embarkation*, 1994, or a lover's return, as

in *Woman, Man, and Boat*, 1952. Colville's use of the everyday is extremely purposeful. His paintings are at once familiar, depicting images that reflect common human experience, and mysterious, imbuing quotidian moments with depth and purpose too often lacking in our lives. As he wrote in 1967, "It is hard to improve on the aims of art given by Pope Gregory in the so-called dark ages, 'to render visible the mysteries of the supra-natural world.'"[22]

Alex Colville, *Embarkation*, 1994, acrylic polymer emulsion on panfibre wood particleboard, 47.5 x 74.2 cm, Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton.

Alex Colville, *Woman, Man, and Boat*, 1952, glazed tempera on Masonite, 32.3 x 51.3 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

A Painter of Influence

Colville's influence is hard to define. In part, his association with Atlantic Realism has positioned the artist as a leading influence on his former students Christopher Pratt (b. 1935), Mary Pratt (b. 1935), and Tom Forrestall (b. 1936), among others. However, he refused to be categorized with any group or style. As he told *The Globe and Mail* in 2003, "I've never been associated with any kind of artists' group. In fact I find the idea deeply distasteful."[23] He has many imitators and self-appointed acolytes, too many of whose works fulfill Colville's definition of bad art—works that are commercial, sentimental, and retrograde.[24] But it is difficult to point out a lasting influence beyond that of his example; there is no "Colvillism" in serious painting. Yet his approach has had an impact: his portrayal of archetypal scenarios in contemporary guises (as in the representations of leaving and returning mentioned above), his use of tension to undermine order even as he creates it, and his philosophical approach to artmaking has reverberated through Canadian art.

LEFT: Mary Pratt, *Supper Table*, 1969, oil on canvas, 61 x 91.4 cm, collection of Mary Pratt. RIGHT: Christopher Pratt, *Woman at a Dresser*, 1964, oil on hardboard, 67.2 x 77.5 cm, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.

At the end of the 1970s, when Colville was at the height of his career, artists such as Eric Fischl (b. 1948), Tim Zuck (b. 1947), and Jeffrey Spalding (b. 1951) turned to a form of conceptual realism in their painting. They were teaching in Halifax at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (now NSCAD University), and could hardly have evaded an awareness of Colville's work. Fischl's *Bad Boy*, 1981, painted just a few years after he left Nova Scotia, is a realist painting with built-in tension and drama that is closer to Colville's work (as in *Sleeper*, 1975) than are the works of most of Colville's "realist" imitators.

In the 1990s a school of conceptually based sculpture arose, with realism as the starting point. Colville was not an influence per se in the work of artists such as Thierry Delva (b. 1955),[25] Colleen Wolstenholme (b. 1963), or Greg Forrest (b. 1965), but all three studied at NSCAD, live in Nova Scotia, and share with Colville the intent of making an idea concrete through the choice and replication of an image. Colville's insistence on the importance of objects as symbols, and on the weight of ideas in the depiction of objects as they are in the world, was inherent to these artists' sense of "sculptural realism."[26]

LEFT: Alex Colville, *Sleeper*, 1975, serigraph on Harumi board, 47 × 57 cm, Alex Colville fonds, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. RIGHT: Eric Fischl, *Bad Boy*, 1981, oil on canvas, 168 x 244 cm, courtesy of Eric Fischl Studio.

In a way, Colville's influence has permeated the region he so intently used as his subject matter. As Sarah Fillmore, chief curator of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, said on the event of his death in 2013, "As a sort of mentor and teacher and as an artist who was very present in this region, his loss will be felt. The students that he has had, the kind of visual language that he has helped to create—there's a strong sense of it."[27] His impact, and that his work is both good and popular, was evident in the 2014 Colville retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. Curated by Andrew Hunter, this exhibition integrated popular-culture works and references, particularly from film,

wherein the curator perceived echoes of Colville's work.[28] For instance, *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965, was exhibited alongside a film still of young girl looking through binoculars in *Moonrise Kingdom*, 2012, a film by Wes Anderson (b. 1969); and *Man with Target Pistol*, 1980, was shown with stills from *No Country for Old Men*, 2007, by Joel (b. 1954) and Ethan Coen (b. 1957). Stanley Kubrick (1928–1999) consciously referenced Colville in the film *The Shining*, 1980, which included posters of Colville's paintings, for example *Dog, Boy, and St. John River*, 1958, in its set decoration. The retrospective's highlights of these echoes show how effective Colville's strategy was—even as he concentrated on creating images drawn from his specific surroundings and experience, he was able to evoke a universal language of myth and metaphor that reverberates throughout our culture.

Alex Colville, *Dog, Boy, and St. John River*, 1958, oil and synthetic resin on Masonite, 61 x 82.6 cm, Museum London. In Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining* (1980), a reproduction of Colville's *Dog, Boy, and St. John River* is visible in the mirror of room 237.

Style
& Technique

Alex Colville's paintings are distinctive and easily recognizable, marked by his careful, unified brushwork and meticulously arranged compositional structures. Another key process for the artist was printmaking, which appealed to Colville in its inherent limits and capacity to create multiples. He worked as a figurative painter throughout his career, focusing on an ideas-based approach. Although always a representational artist, he was interested in presenting images that expressed thoughts about the world, rather than mirroring it.

Finding His Voice

Alex Colville studied at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, and was influenced by his teacher Stanley Royle (1888–1961), an established Post-Impressionist painter from the U.K. Additionally, Colville had an enduring love of early Renaissance painting. Brief exposure to historical European painting, in particular the works of Giotto (c. 1267–1337) and Paolo Uccello (1397–1475) at the Louvre in Paris during the Second World War, provided Colville with years of inspiration. "I realized, that it might take me years, for instance, to absorb the effects of the two days I spent in the Louvre," Colville wrote.[1] His technique of laying down tiny, individual strokes of pure colour to build up a luminous, rich surface, despite its lack of texture or material depth, lent his brushwork an invisibility that echoed the early Renaissance painters' flatly painted surfaces.

Paolo Uccello, *Niccolò Mauruzi da Tolentino at the Battle of San Romano*, c. 1438-40, egg tempera with walnut oil and linseed oil on poplar, 182 x 320 cm, The National Gallery, London.

Colville was interested in such diverse artists as the American Luminists and Precisionists, and by such Realists as Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), Edward Hopper (1882–1967), and Ben Shahn (1898–1969), artists who were interested in imbuing the daily activities of their surroundings with symbolic depth, a strategy Colville shared throughout his career.[2]

In the early 1950s the British artist Henry Moore (1898–1986) was a marked influence, as is apparent in the sculptural forms in Colville's series of nude figures in landscapes, such as *Nudes on Shore*, 1950. The poses, the treatment of detail, and the settings are all reminiscent of Moore's sculpture and drawings from this period. Though Moore had achieved quite a lot of fame during the Second World War with his shelter drawings, 1940–41, it was the Saint John, New Brunswick, painter (and fellow war artist) Miller Brittain (1914–1968) who led Colville to study the works of the great British sculptor.[3] In the early 1950s Colville started making work he considered mature: "When I finished *Nude and Dummy* I said, 'Now I sense that I'm kind of on to something'—what people in literature and poetry speak of as a poet finding their voice."[4]

Alex Colville, *Nudes on Shore*, 1950, tempera on Masonite, 61 x 96.5 cm, Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton.

Henry Moore, *Three Reclining Nudes*, c. 1928, chalk, brush and coloured washes on paper, 30.8 x 51.1 cm Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Ideas in Material

In the late 1940s Colville was primarily working in watercolours and oils, the materials that he had used as a war artist. Works such as *Railroad over Marsh*, 1947, even looked like his war art in subject, composition, and technique.[5] By 1950, however, he had also begun to use tempera as he strove to find a medium more conducive to the hard edges, simple lines, and meticulous layering of marks with which he constructed images. He painted his 1948 mural, *The History of Mount Allison*, in egg tempera on canvas, which was then adhered to the wall. He also completed smaller paintings, such as *Nudes on Shore*, 1950, in egg tempera.

As the 1950s unfolded, he sought clarity in his materials and made a deliberate shift in his subject matter, focusing on the human figure, in order to communicate more effectively. As he explained in a lecture, "Now I realized that I couldn't go on using horses as my only organic forms, and also that oil painting was entirely unsuited to my method of working. I therefore decided that I would paint the human figure and that I would use tempera."[6]

Colville described himself as a "conceptual" artist, no longer relying on what he saw around him, but instead constructing images out of elements both found and invented. As he wrote in 1951, "The conceptual artist operates more independently of mundane experience; perceiving or seeing for the conceptual artist is a process which is used to confirm or to modify what he has already determined."[7] Colville uses "conceptual"

Alex Colville, *Railroad over Marsh*, 1947, oil on canvas, 60.9 x 81.3 cm, Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton.

differently here than it has come to be used in art history and theory, denoting not the 1960s idea of an art movement dedicated to the "dematerialization of the art object,"[8] but rather to a very material and philosophical position that painting is a form of thinking. As such, it is an accurate and appropriate use of the term as it relates to his practice.

Colville's mature painting style is based on a pointillist approach of layering marks next to each other, each mark a tiny point of colour. The sum of the parts makes the image and the tone, and the colours are not mixed in the strokes themselves. Though the technique was pioneered by Georges Seurat (1859–1891) and Paul Signac (1863–1935), Colville used a much less expressive style of pointillism that does not draw attention to the tiny strokes of colour that comprise his compositions. To that end, Colville worked with fine sable brushes, mixing each colour with a binder to create a unified surface. Glazing at the end of the process ensured a coherent, almost seamless surface. Additionally, the works are constructed on a complicated and rigorous geometric underpinning. That combination, first arrived at in the early 1950s in works such as *Nude and Dummy*, 1950, *Nudes on Shore*, 1950, *Two Pacers*, 1951, and *Four Figures on Wharf*, 1952, marked a change in style from which Colville never deviated. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s Colville switched between tempera (casein or egg tempera) and oil. By the mid-1960s acrylic paints had achieved a quality and consistency such that Colville soon began using them exclusively, and did so until his death.

LEFT: Alex Colville, *The History of Mount Allison*, 1948, egg tempera on canvas adhered to the wall, 488 x 411 cm, Wallace McCain Student Centre, Mount Allison University, Sackville. RIGHT: Georges Seurat, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte – 1884*, 1884/86, oil on canvas, 207.5 x 308.1 cm, Art Institute of Chicago.

Studies: Sketches, Photographs, Watercolours

Alex Colville always drew, both as a compositional tool and as an *aide-mémoire*: making sketches of scenes or ideas that might have a reference in a painting he was currently contemplating. For Colville, painting was a way of thinking, and sketches played an important role in ordering thoughts: "The exploration of the unconscious, which is what I

think I am doing, essentially, can only be undertaken with some kind of butterfly net, some kind of aid—something that can catch things."[9]
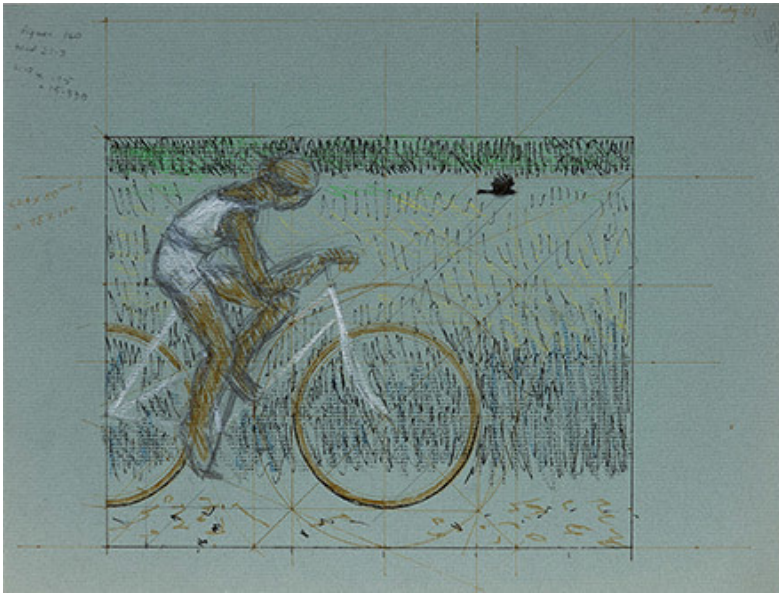
LEFT: Alex Colville, *Study for Cyclist and Crow*, 1981, pencils and ink on green paper, 22.7 x 30.4 cm, private collection. **RIGHT:** Alex Colville, *Cyclist and Crow*, 1981, acrylic on hardboard, 70.6 x 100 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

He used a camera as a tool for composition, collecting images he might use only months or years later. Colville employed photographs for depicting specific elements, such as the female on horseback in *French Cross*, 1988, which he combined with another element (in this case the Acadian Deportation Cross at Grand Pré, Nova Scotia) in order to make a complete composition. Colville distinguished the difference between a photograph and a painting, noting that a photograph is "taken" while a painting is "made."[10] Curator Philip Fry wrote of Colville's relationship to photography that "in striking contrast to the photographic image, what happens in *Cyclist and Crow* appears as the embodiment of a mental image through the exercise of the painter's competence as an artist, what could be called a 'slow' and 'body-centred' technology. The painted gesture is a construct of the imagination; it has not been *taken* or *abstracted* from time."[11] Fry's point holds for any of Colville's paintings—the camera was merely another tool. "As a good realist, I have to reinvent the world," the artist said.[12]

Another important tool for Colville was the medium of watercolour, which he mainly used to capture colour decisions in his sketches, for example, *Study for Sackville Railway Station mural (Soldier and Girl)*, 1942. Though from his youth until the 1950s he turned to watercolours frequently, he stopped employing them in finished works after he discovered tempera and acrylic emulsions. A ruler and compass were as integral to his art supplies as a pencil or brush, and he filled sketches with mathematical notations and geometric calculations.

LEFT: Alex Colville, *Study for Sackville Railway Station mural (Soldier and Girl)*, 1942, watercolour, chalk, ink, conte, and graphite on manila, 45.5 x 30.5 cm, private collection.
RIGHT: Alex Colville, *Soldier and Girl at Station*, 1953, glazed tempera on hardboard, 40.6 x 61 cm, The Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Geometry as Structure

Colville's passion for order begins with the underlying geometry of his image, a rigid skeleton of geometric relationships that dictate every aspect of his compositions. "Geometry seems to be a way into the process," he said. "If I were a poet I would write sonnets. I would not do what you speak of as 'free verse.' I work within existing forms."[13] Often based on the golden section, his geometry is a construction technique. As curator Philip Fry noted, Colville used geometry as a "regulatory system"—as a way of imposing coherent, predictable, and orderly relationships between objects in his compositions. Often borrowed from architecture, these systems could be relatively simple, as in the golden section, or more complex, as in the Modulor system of Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and the ratios derived from the mathematical sequence called the Fibonacci series, for example, in *Study for St. Croix Rider*, December 30–31, 1996.[14]

Colville's meticulous sketches show how, before he began to paint, the image and the geometry evolved as he arrived at a composition that communicates the ideas and feelings he looked for. As art historian Martin Kemp writes: "The concept for the picture is triggered by his vision of a pregnant moment in the life of things. The picture shape that 'fits' the subject is then altered by repeated geometrical structuring using complex overlays from Colville's repertoire of inscribed circles, squares, triangles, logarithmic spirals, and ratios. Human proportionality, which is based on a system of head lengths beloved of Renaissance architects and more recently Le Corbusier, has an important role in these paintings that involve his cast of wordless characters."[15]

For example, there are twenty-one studies for Colville's painting *Ocean Limited*, 1962, in the collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. The sketches were primarily used to work out the geometric underpinnings of the major compositional elements: how
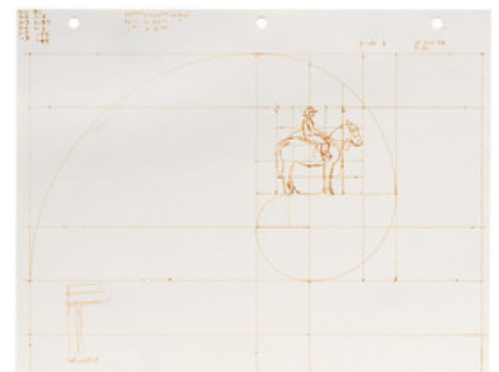
Alex Colville, *Study for St. Croix Rider*, December 30–31, 1996, raw sienna ink on paper, 21.7 x 28 cm, private collection. In this study, Colville uses the golden section as the mathematical basis of his composition.

the head of the walking figure and the train engine line up, the relative placement of the horizontal elements of the railway embankment and road, and the vertical elements of telephone poles and the walking figure in the foreground.

Order as mathematical correspondence is an ancient idea, stretching back to Pythagoras and earlier in our intellectual history. Nobel Prize–winning physicist Frank Wilczek sums up the persistent belief that a beautiful order underlies the apparent chaos of the world in a discussion of the Pythagorean aphorism, "All things are number": "For the true essence of Pythagoras's credo is not a literal assertion that the world must embody whole numbers, but the optimistic conviction that the world should embody *beautiful concepts*."[16]
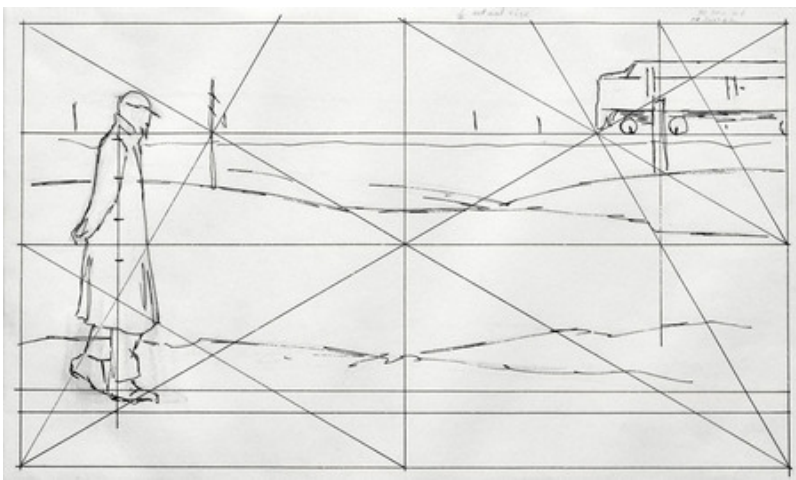
Alex Colville, *Sketch for Ocean Limited*, c. 1961, graphite and ink on paper, 15 x 24 cm, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

Alex Colville, *Ocean Limited*, 1962, oil and synthetic resin on Masonite, 68.5 x 119.3 cm, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

In organizing the composition by use of "beautiful concepts" to establish an orderly underlying framework, Colville adds a sense of solidity to what at first appears as a scene taken from observation. Geometry determines the perspective, ensuring that the image, however much an invention, feels right to the eye. An almost subliminal sense of proportion and alignment conveys the underlying geometric order. Ultimately, Colville's geometry is most important not for its specific angles, arcs, or correspondences, but for the foundational rigour that the balanced geometric framework gives to the image itself. Seeking order, one must banish chance.

Structure and Routine

Colville was a creature of habit, with a routine that permeated every aspect of his artmaking. His working life was as structured as his paintings. Critic Jeffrey Meyers notes, "His schedule is as regular as Immanuel Kant's in Königsburg. He rises early, walks the dog and works from eight to twelve. After lunch and a nap, he picks up his mail at the local post office and does some shopping, answers letters and makes phone calls, and lets the afternoon 'kind of drift away'. After dinner at six he reads or watches television, is in bed at nine and asleep soon after."[17] Alex Colville thought long and hard about every aspect of his finished works, including the frames and the materials upon which he painted. Because he used egg tempera, casein tempera, and acrylic polymer emulsion—all of which dry hard and brittle—Colville worked on Masonite surfaces or

other types of wooden panel. He did not want any flex or give, neither while he was working nor once the paintings were finished.
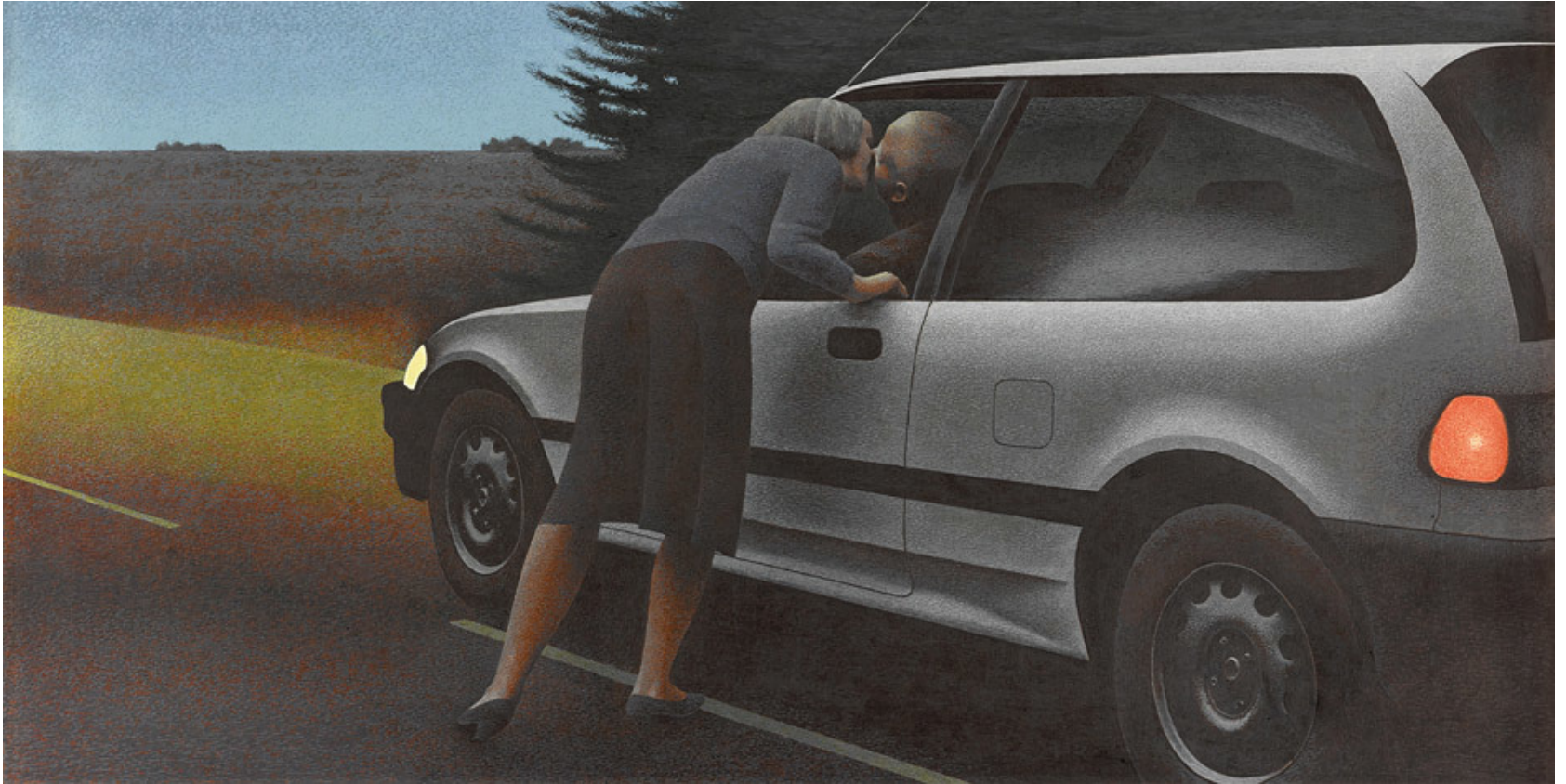
Alex Colville, *Kiss with Honda*, 1989, acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 31 x 62 cm, private collection.

He also cared about how his works were seen, and he built and designed his own frames. Each simple and elegant wooden frame constructed by the artist from the late 1950s onward is unique, and reflects the artist's passion for order. And yet it is rare to find images of Colville's paintings that include the frames. Most major monographs on the artist omit them altogether. A welcome exception is Philip Fry's book *Alex Colville: Paintings, Prints and Processes, 1983–1994*, in which all of the paintings are shown in frames designed and constructed by Colville. One can see his varied approaches: almost architectural and stark, painted black, in the case of *Kiss with Honda*, 1989, or *Bat*, 1989; less assertive and lighter in tone, painted in washy greys in the frames for *Boat and Bather*, 1984, or *Western Star*, 1985. This attention to detail is entirely consistent with Colville's approach to artmaking, where being meticulous is as necessary as being thoughtful. Craft, the actual making of things, was important to Colville. As he said, "Anyone working in the visual arts is a kind of artisan."[18]

Alex Colville, *Western Star*, 1985, acrylic on Masonite, 73.8 x 73.8 cm, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

A Cinematic Painter

Film, arguably the most influential art form of the twentieth century, had a distinct impact on how Colville composed his images. He layered multiple viewpoints and time frames in his images, so that at first view the scene makes sense, but as one studies it further, it becomes apparent that different moments are pictured simultaneously, as in *Horse and Train*, 1954. Tom Smart writes, "The horse exists on an entirely different perceptual

plane to the train; it is as if the animal has been collaged on the ground occupied by the track and train."[19] Colville's use of slightly differing viewpoints, as if images registered seconds or moments apart, occurs in *West Brooklyn Road*, 1996. Here, the viewpoint is from a speeding automobile, but with a different focus in different sections of the painting—the oncoming truck is registered a few seconds before it, or the speeding car, reaches the overpass, creating a change in scale that reflects a time lapse in the point of attention. Much like in an early Renaissance painting, Colville depicts different times in the same composition. However, the shortness of the duration of the two time frames here points more to the influence of film on the artist.

LEFT: Eadweard Muybridge, *The Horse in Motion*, 1878. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. Through a sequence of photographs, Muybridge illustrated a horse in motion running at a 1:40 gait over the Palo Alto track in California. RIGHT: Alex Colville, *Horse and Train*, 1954, casein tempera on hardboard, 41.2 x 54.2 cm, Art Gallery of Hamilton.

Film was also ubiquitous; even tiny Sackville, where Colville lived for many years, had a cinema where popular films were on view in the manner conceived by their originators. This was not so for most fine art, for which Colville had to travel—something he did rarely. Film's immediacy and its ability to tell stories and the way distinct images cohered together had an impact on Colville's thinking about how he constructed his own images. Of film, and in the context of discussing *Horse and Train*, 1954, he said that he aspired to "the kind of immediacy that films have [and] this means what I think of as authenticating the thing so that it is not just a kind of an abstract or symbolic train, but a very specific, actual thing."[20]

However, Colville stated that he deliberately chose to live in Sackville to escape influence—he was not seeking to emulate anyone, but rather was intent on his own visual language and approach to painting. Colville never worked in a group and despite his inclusion over the decades in several "realist" exhibitions he never wholeheartedly adopted any school of painting as his own. Colville's search for meaning was a conversation with history, with the past and the future, played out in the eternal present of each viewing of his work. He aspired to be wholly of his time, but also timeless.

Serigraphs

From 1955, in addition to his paintings, Colville worked with serigraphy. Usually in print runs of between twenty and seventy, Colville's serigraphs, or silkscreen prints, should be considered of equal weight to his paintings, and they show little difference from his panels in subject matter and composition. Colville made thirty-five screen prints between 1955 and 2002, and in 2013 he donated an entire set to Mount Allison University, where he first studied and later taught. The donation comprises the only complete set of his screen prints in any public or private collection.

Alex Colville, *After Swimming*, 1955, serigraph on paper, edition of 27, 63.6 x 37.9 cm, Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax.

Serigraphs are made by pushing ink through a fine mesh onto a substrate, with the areas that are not to be that particular colour blocked by a stencil or other medium. A different screen is used for each colour. Colville made all his prints himself and never reproduced his paintings in this medium. Rather, each print is a unique composition. *After Swimming*, 1955, was Colville's first published serigraph. This image reflects a theme that Colville returned to often throughout his career—the relationship between a man and a woman, specifically between husband and wife, as evidenced by the use of himself and his wife, Rhoda, as the models.

Though a complicated and demanding process, serigraphy took much less time than his paintings and allowed Colville to work in multiples. The relative immediacy of the technique (colours are applied over the whole surface and images appear at once rather than being gradually built up with thousands of brush strokes), the unforgiving nature of making images with colour applied through screens, and the inherent limits of the process, drew Colville's interest: "One of the appeals of print-making is the discipline of the printing technique; in painting almost anything is possible—in print-making there are limitations of means; the concept must be adapted to a more economical mode of expression."[21] Interestingly, he didn't branch out into other kinds of printmaking, nor did he, after the 1940s, create watercolours or drawings as finished artworks. He focused unswervingly on paintings and screen prints.

Where to See

The works of Alex Colville are held in public and private collections internationally. The Canadian War Museum holds most of Colville's wartime art, and the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the National Gallery of Canada all have sizable collections of his paintings. Colville's serigraphs and other printed works are held in various collections across Canada. Although the following institutions hold the works listed below, they may not always be on view.

Art Gallery of Hamilton

123 King Street West
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
905-527-6610
artgalleryofhamilton.com

Alex Colville, *Horse and Train*, **1954**
Casein tempera on hardboard
41.2 x 54.2 cm

Alex Colville, *Traveller*, **1992**
Acrylic polymer emulsion on board
43.2 x 86.4 cm

Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

1723 Hollis Street
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
902-424-5280
artgalleryofnovascotia.ca

Alex Colville, *Three Girls on a Wharf*, **1953**
Glazed casein tempera on Masonite
41.1 x 25.4 cm

Alex Colville, *Sketch for Ocean Limited*, c. 1961
Graphite and ink on paper
15 x 24 cm
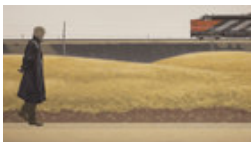
Alex Colville, *Ocean Limited*, 1962
Oil and synthetic resin on Masonite
68.5 x 119.3 cm

Alex Colville, *Dog in Car*, 1999
Acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard
36 x 62.4 cm

Art Gallery of Ontario

317 Dundas Street West
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
1-877-225-4246 or 416-979-6648
ago.ca

Alex Colville, *Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia*, 1940
Oil on beaverboard
30.1 x 40.1 cm

Alex Colville, *Soldier and Girl at Station*, 1953
Glazed tempera on hardboard
40.6 x 61 cm

Alex Colville, *Woman in Bathtub*, 1973
Acrylic polymer emulsion on particleboard
87.8 x 87.6 cm

Beaverbrook Art Gallery

703 Queen Street
Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada
506-458-2028
beaverbrookartgallery.org

Alex Colville, *Railroad over Marsh*, **1947**
Oil on canvas
60.9 x 81.3 cm

Alex Colville, *Nudes on Shore*, **1950**
Tempera on Masonite
61 x 96.5 cm

Alex Colville, *Embarkation*, **1994**
Acrylic polymer emulsion on panfibre wood particleboard
47.5 x 74.2 cm

Canadian War Museum, Ottawa

1 Vimy Place
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
1-800-555-5621
warmuseum.ca

Alex Colville, *A German Flare Goes Up*, **1944**
Watercolour, ink, and carbon pencil on paper
38.8 x 57.2 cm
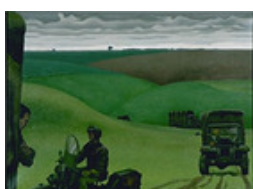
Alex Colville, *Convoy in Yorkshire, No. 2*, **1944**
Oil on canvas
76.3 x 102 cm

Alex Colville, *Landing Craft Assault Off Southern France*, 1944
Oil on canvas
101.4 x 76 cm

Alex Colville, *Infantry*, 1945
Pencil on paper
19 x 22.6 cm

Alex Colville, *Sketch Drawing, A Dead Horse*, 1945
Coloured pencil on paper
27.4 x 35.8 cm

Alex Colville, *Tragic Landscape*, 1945
Oil on canvas
61 x 91 cm
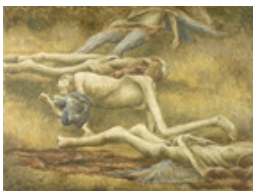
Alex Colville, *Bodies in a Grave, Belsen*, 1946
Oil on canvas
76.3 x 101.6 cm

Alex Colville, *Infantry, Near Nijmegen, Holland*, 1946
Oil on canvas
101.6 x 121.9 cm

Alex Colville, *The Nijmegen Bridge, Holland*, 1946
Oil on canvas
91.6 x 122.7 cm

Carleton University Art Gallery

St. Patrick's Building, Carleton University
1125 Colonel By Drive
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
613-520-2120
cuag.carleton.ca

Alex Colville, *Windmill and Farm*, 1947
Oil on Masonite
71.5 x 55.8 cm

Dalhousie Art Gallery

6101 University Avenue
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
902-494-3820
artgallery.dal.ca

Alex Colville, *After Swimming*, 1955
Serigraph on paper, edition of 27
63.6 x 37.9 cm

Galerie d'art Louise-et-Reuben-Cohen, Université de Moncton

405 University Avenue

Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada

506-858-4088

umoncton.ca/umcm-ga

Alex Colville, *Study for Nude and Dummy*, **1950**
Ink and watercolour on paper
30.5 x 40.6 cm

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

1380 Sherbrooke Street West

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

1-800-899-6873 or 514-285-2000

mbam.qc.ca/en

Alex Colville, *Church and Horse*, **1964**
Acrylic on hardboard
55.5 x 68.7 cm

Alex Colville, *Cyclist and Crow*, **1981**
Acrylic on hardboard
70.6 x 100 cm

Mount Allison University

Wallace McCain Student Centre
60 York Street
Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada
506-364-2269
mta.ca
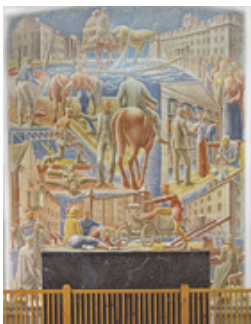
Alex Colville, *The History of Mount Allison*, **1948**
Egg tempera on canvas, adhered to wall
488 x 411 cm

Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

185 St. Catherine Street West
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
514-847-6226
macm.org/en
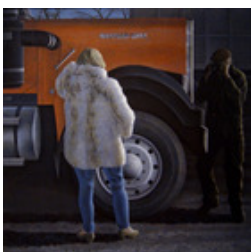
Alex Colville, *Western Star*, **1985**
Acrylic on Masonite
73.8 x 73.8 cm

Museum London

421 Ridout Street North
London, Ontario, Canada
519-661-0333
museumlondon.ca
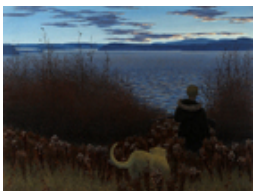
Alex Colville, *Dog, Boy, and St. John River*, 1958
Oil and synthetic resin on Masonite
61 x 82.6 cm

Museum of Modern Art

111 West 53 Street
New York, New York, USA
212-708-9400
moma.org

Alex Colville, *Skater*, 1964
Synthetic polymer paint on composition board
113 x 69.8 cm

National Gallery of Canada

380 Sussex Drive

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

1-800-319-2787 or 613-990-1985

gallery.ca

Alex Colville, *Four Figures on Wharf*, **1952**
Casein tempera on card, mounted on Masonite
43.1 x 78.8 cm

Alex Colville, *Woman, Man, and Boat*, **1952**
Glazed tempera on Masonite
32.3 x 51.3 cm

Alex Colville, *Family and Rainstorm*, **1955**
Glazed tempera on Masonite
57.1 x 74.9 cm

Alex Colville, *Couple on the Beach*, **1957**
Casein tempera on Masonite
73.4 x 96.4 cm

Alex Colville, *To Prince Edward Island*, **1965**
Acrylic emulsion on Masonite
61.9 x 92.5 cm
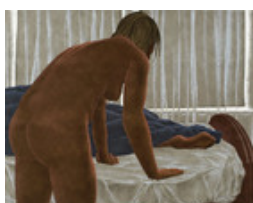
Alex Colville, *Sleeper*, **1975**
Serigraph on Harumi board
47 x 57 cm

Alex Colville, *Living Room*, **1999–2000**
Acrylic on Masonite
41.8 x 58.5 cm

New Brunswick Museum

1 Market Square
Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada
506-643-2300
nbm-mnb.ca
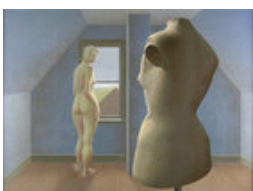
Alex Colville, *Nude and Dummy*, **1950**
Glazed gum arabic emulsion on board
60.9 x 81.2 cm

Owens Art Gallery

61 York Street, Mount Allison University
Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada
506-364-2574
mta.ca/owens

Alex Colville, *Untitled*, **1940**
Oil on pressed board
40.6 x 50.6 cm

Alex Colville, *Black Cat*, **1996**
Serigraph on paper, edition of 70
36 x 36 cm

Notes

Biography

1. Alex Colville, quoted in Graham Metson and Cheryl Lean, eds., *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1981), 21.

2. Colville, quoted in Metson and Lean, *Diary of a War Artist*, 22.

3. Alex Colville, quoted in Mark Cheetham, *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1994), 20.

4. Rhoda Colville, quoted in 90th Parallel Film and Television Productions Ltd., *Studio: The Life and Times of Alex Colville*, directed by Andrew Gregg (Toronto:Telefilm Canada, 2001), documentary film, 42 min.

5. Tom Smart, *Alex Colville: Return* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2003), 28–33.

6. Alex Colville, quoted in Peter Goddard, "Creating a Colville," *Toronto Star*, June 13, 2004.

7. Alex Colville, quoted in "Veteran Stories," The Memory Project, www.thememoryproject.com/stories/850:alex-colville/.

8. Alex Colville, "My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art," lecture from November 1951, reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 204.

9. Mary Pratt, quoted in Leah Sandals, "Canadian Art World Remembers Alex Colville," *Canadian Art*, July 17, 2013, canadianart.ca/news/canadian-art-world-remembers-alex-colville/.

10. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville*, 65.

11. The Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario) purchased *Three Horses* in 1946. This was Colville's first sale to a public art gallery.

12. Quoted in Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville*, 65.

13. In 1954, the National Gallery bought two works from 1952: *Child and Dog* and *Woman, Man, and Boat*. The Art Gallery of Hamilton acquired *Horse and Train*, 1954, in 1957.

14. Another reason, initially, was that because no cost was associated with Rhoda modelling, that aspect of his practice did not put strain on his family resources.

15. Alex Colville, quoted in Robert Fulford, "Regarding Alex Colville," *Saturday Night* 115, no. 8 (2000).

16. Alex Colville, in footage from "At Home with Alex Colville," *Telescope*, CBC Television, September 21, 1967.

17. Alex Colville, quoted in Mark Cheetham, "The World, the Work, and the Artist: Alex Colville and the Communality of Vision," *RACAR: Revue d'art canadien/Canadian Art Review* 15, no. 1 (1988): 59.

18. Cheetham, *The Observer Observed*, 54.

19. John Bentley Mays, "Colville's Importance Exaggerated," *The Globe and Mail*, July 23, 1983.

20. Richard Perry, "Alex Colville: Why Have We Made Him Head Boy of Canadian Painters?," *Canadian Forum* 64 (March 1985).

21. Mays, "Chill of Death Pervades Images in Colville Show," *The Globe and Mail*, November 5, 1994.

22. Hans Werner, "Nothing Phoney," *Canadian Art* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 70–77.

23. See Colville, "My Experience," 204–5.

24. Peter Simpson, "Love Story: The Bond between Alex and Rhoda Colville." *Ottawa Citizen*, August 10, 2015.

25. Colville, "My Experience," 208.

26. James Adams, "Alex Colville Tops as AGO's Best-Attended Canadian Exhibition," *The Globe and Mail*, January 16, 2015.

Key Works: Infantry, Near Nijmegen, Holland

1. Quote from "War Artist," *Alex Colville: A Canadian Icon*, National Gallery of Canada website, www.gallery.ca/colville/en/21.htm.

Key Works: Nude and Dummy

1. Quoted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 65.

2. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville*, 65.

3. Shane Nakoneshny, "Alex Colville," *Arts Atlantic* 43 (1992): 11.

4. As David Burnett writes, "The work that most impressed him offers few surprises: the mosaics of Sant'Apollinaire in Classe and San Vitale in Ravenna; the painting of Giotto, Masaccio, and Piero della Francesca; and the mysterious creation of space in the work of Uccello." David Burnett, *Colville* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart / Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983), 115.

5. See Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible in Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

6. Colville said, "I decided to settle down in Sackville where I could have the time, the feeling of belonging, the solitude and, above all, the freedom from distraction which I needed to become orientated as an artist. What I wanted was the absence of further artistic stimulation." Alex Colville, "My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art," lecture from November 1951, reprinted in Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville*, 204.

Key Works: Three Girls on a Wharf

1. See Alex Colville, "My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art," lecture from November 1951, reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 204.

2. Jeffrey Meyers, "Dangerously Real," *Modern Painters* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 94.

Key Works: Horse and Train

1. Roy Campbell, "Dedication to Mary Campbell," from *The Collected Poems of Roy Campbell* vol. 1 (London: The Bodley Head, 1949).

2. David Burnett, *Colville* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart / Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983), 100.

Key Works: To Prince Edward Island

1. Alex Colville, in a letter to curator Patrick Laurette, July 31, 1980, quoted in Andrew Hunter, *Colville* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2014), 22.

Key Works: Centennial Coins

1. Alex Colville, "Some Thoughts about My Painting," in David Burnett, *Colville* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart / Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983), 17.
2. Colville's first art teacher, Sarah Hart (1880–1981), was primarily a woodcarver and taught that technique as part of her extension classes for Mount Allison University.
3. Department of Finance press release, April 20, 1966, reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 208–09.
4. Colville, in an interview by Burnett, July 28, 1982, quoted in Burnett, *Colville*, 157.

Key Works: Pacific

1. Alex Colville, in an interview by David Burnett, July 28, 1982, quoted in David Burnett, *Colville* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart / Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983), 55.
2. Quoted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 140.
3. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville*, 142.
4. Han Werner, "Nothing Phoney," *Canadian Art* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 72.

Key Works: Refrigerator

1. Mark Cheetham, *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1994), 90.
2. The average height of a side-by-side refrigerator today is 170 to 178 centimetres.

Key Works: Woman in Bathtub

1. Alex Colville, in an interview with Sarah Milroy, "Alex Colville and the Disturbance beneath the Tranquility," *The Globe and Mail*, July 17, 2013, quoted in Andrew Hunter, *Colville* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2014), 24.

Key Works: Black Cat

1. Colville made thirty-five serigraphs between 1955 and 2002. An entire set, the only one extant, is now in the collection of the Owens Art Gallery at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick.
2. Quoted in Mark Cheetham, *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1994), 125.

3. Tom Smart, *Alex Colville: Return* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2003), 80.

Key Works: West Brooklyn Road

1. An overpass just north of Hantsport was built in 2007 and named after Freddie Wilson.

Key Works: Studio

1. Alex Colville, quoted in Robert Fulford, "A Self-Portrait by Alex Colville," *The National Post*, October 31, 2000.

Significance & Critical Issues

1. From Colville's Brockington Lecture, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 1981, quoted in David Burnett, *Colville* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart / Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983), 41.

2. Quoted in Graham Metson and Cheryl Lean, eds., *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1981), 19.

3. Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), 33.

4. Tom Smart, *Alex Colville: Return* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2003), 34.

5. Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 23–24.

6. Camus, *The Rebel*, 10.

7. This references Roy Campbell's 1949 poem "Dedicated to Mary Campbell," the inspiration for Colville's painting *Horse and Train*, 1954.

8. Robert Fulford, "Painter Laureate," *Saturday Night*, July 1983, 5–6.

9. Alex Colville, "My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art," lecture from November 1951, reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 203–8.

10. Art historian Alfred H. Barr used this term to title an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1943.

11. In his 1989 catalogue essay "Tantramar City: Contemporary Painting by Mount Allison Associates" (first published for the exhibit *Atque Ars* at Mount Allison's Owens Art Gallery, which was curated by Cliff Eyland, Charlotte Townsend Gault, and Gemey Kelly), artist and curator Cliff Eyland credits Christopher Pratt with coining this term.

12. Alex Colville, "Notes for Marina Vaizey," July 28, 1976. Quoted in Burnett, *Colville*, 136.

13. Alex Colville, quoted in John DeMont, "Alex Colville's Terrible Beauty," *Maclean's*, December 22, 2003, 46.

14. Martin Kemp, "Science in Culture: Alex Colville's Exhaustive Search for Mathematical Probity," *Nature* 430, no. 7003 (August 26, 2004): 969.

15. Mark Cheetham, *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1994), 116.

16. See "The Reader of Novels," in Cheetham, *The Observer Observed*, 109–14.

17. Alex Colville, quoted in Walter Stewart, "Alex Colville: Realist Painter," *Atlantic Advocate*,

November 1976, 10.

18. Ann Kitz, quoted in Andrew Hunter, *Colville* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2014), 26.

19. Hunter, *Colville*, 28.

20. Colville, "My Experience," 207.

21. Colville, "My Experience," 206.

22. From Colville's statement from the catalogue for the exhibition *Statements: 18 Canadian Artists*, (Regina: Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1967), quoted in Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville*, 210.

23. Shawna Richer, "Colville's Unspoken Truths," *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto edition, November 4, 2003.

24. "But if one is not to accept the argument that my work is rather popular because it is bad (commercial, sentimental, retrogressive) then one is asserting that it is perhaps good, *although* popular." Alex Colville, "Some Thoughts about My Painting," unpublished statement, November 29, 1973, quoted in Burnett, *Colville*, 17.

25. Delva does admit to the influence of Christopher Pratt, and so, therefore, that of Colville by extension. From author's conversation with the artist in 2005 for research toward the essay "Thierry Delva: Collection and Other Objects" for the catalogue *Thierry Delva* (Museum London / Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2005) to the touring exhibition of the same name.

26. See Ray Cronin, "New Sculptural Realism," *Sculpture* 22, no. 9 (2003): 42–47.

27. Sarah Fillmore, quoted in Leah Sandals, "Canadian Art World Remembers Alex Colville," *Canadian Art*, July 17, 2013, http://canadianart.ca/news/canadian-art-world-remembers-alex-colville/.

28. Hunter, *Colville*, 35.

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1. Alex Colville, "My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art," lecture from November 1951, reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 203–8.

2. David Burnett, *Colville* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart / Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983), 199.

3. Burnett, *Colville*, 64.

4. Alex Colville, "The Art of Being There," *Maclean's*, December 22, 2003, 46.

5. Andrew Hunter links images of this work with *London Bridge*, 1945, and *The Nijmegen Bridge, Holland*, 1946, in Andrew Hunter, *Colville* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2014), 58–60.

6. Colville, "My Experience," 204.

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8. See Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1973] 1997).

9. Quoted in Peter Goddard, "Creating a Colville," *Toronto Star*, June 13, 2004.

10. "It is important to realize that a photograph is *taken*, whereas a painting is *made*. To *take* something is a form of abduction." Alex Colville, quoted in *Statements: 18 Canadian Artists* (Regina: Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1967), 34–37.

11. Philip Fry, *Alex Colville: Paintings, Prints, and Processes, 1983–1994* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1994), 15.

12. Quoted in Andreas Schultz, "Like the Headlight on a Locomotive Speeding Through the Night," in *Colville Tributes*, ed. Robert Fulford et al. (Kentville: Gaspereau Press, 2011), 64.

13. Colville quoted in Goddard, "Creating a Colville."

14. Fry, *Paintings, Prints, and Processes*, 19.

15. Martin Kemp, "Science in Culture," *Nature* 430, no. 7003 (August 26, 2004): 969.

16. Frank Wilczek, *A Beautiful Question: Finding Nature's Deep Design* (Penguin Press: New York, 2015), 26. Emphasis in the original.

17. Jeffrey Meyers, "Dangerously Real," *Modern Painters* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 94–97.

18. Quoted in John DeMont, "Alex Colville's Terrible Beauty: Menace Lurks in the Paintings of a Master," *Maclean's* 107, no. 41 (October 10, 1994): 60.

19. Tom Smart, *Alex Colville: Return* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2003), 42.

20. Quoted in Burnett, *Colville*, 105.

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Glossary

abstract art

Visual art that uses form, colour, line, and gestural marks in compositions that do not attempt to represent images of real things. Abstract art may interpret reality in an altered form, or depart from it entirely. Also called nonfigurative or nonrepresentational art.

Abstract Expressionism

A style that flourished in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, defined by its combination of formal abstraction and self-conscious expression. The term describes a wide variety of work; among the most famous Abstract Expressionists are Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Willem de Kooning.

Anderson, Wes (American, b. 1969)

A film director, producer, and screenwriter whose quirky "serious" comedies regularly earn him major critical and commercial success. *Rushmore* (1998) and *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) exemplify his distinctive approach to storytelling and visual style. He works repeatedly with the same actors.

Art Association of Montreal

Founded in 1860 as an offshoot of the Montreal Society of Artists (itself dating to 1847), the Art Association of Montreal became the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 1947. The MMFA is now a major international museum, with more than 760,000 visitors annually.

Atlantic Realism

Realism was embraced by several important Nova Scotian painters in the mid- and late twentieth century, including Miller Brittain, Christopher Pratt, Mary Pratt, Alex Colville, and Tom Forrestall. It remains an important variety of Canadian Maritime art.

Automatistes

A Montreal-based artists' group interested in Surrealism and the Surrealist technique of automatism. Centred on the artist, teacher, and theorist Paul-Émile Borduas, the Automatistes exhibited regularly between 1946 and 1954, making Montreal a locus of mid-century avant-garde art. Members included Marcel Barbeau, Marcelle Ferron, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Fernand Leduc, and Françoise Sullivan.

Balthus (French, 1908–2001)

A self-taught painter, illustrator, and stage designer from a highly artistic family whose circle included writer Rainer Maria Rilke and artist Pierre Bonnard. Although precociously talented, Balthus was not widely appreciated until late in his career, perhaps because his classically inspired oeuvre appeared incongruent with the ethos of modernism, which dominated the fine arts of his era.

Bechtle, Robert (American, b. 1932)

A painter and leading figure of Photorealism. The stunning realism, seemingly benign subject matter (cars, houses, families), and haphazard composition of his paintings all indicate his use of photographic source material, an important part of his process since the 1960s. A major retrospective of his work was held at SFMOMA in 2005 and travelled to other major art institutions.

Borduas, Paul-Émile (Canadian, 1905–1960)

The leader of the avant-garde Automatistes and one of Canada's most important modern artists. Borduas was also an influential advocate for reform in Quebec, calling for liberation from religious and narrow nationalist values in the 1948 manifesto *Refus global*. (See *Paul-Émile Borduas: Life & Work* by François-Marc Gagnon.)

Brittain, Miller (Canadian, 1914–1968)

Brittain first trained with Elizabeth Russell Holt, a central figure of the arts scene in Saint John, New Brunswick, before studying at the Art Students League of New York from 1930 to 1932. His drawings, paintings, watercolours, and murals reveal an enduring interest in social realism and psychology. Brittain was a founding member of the Federation of Canadian Artists.

Brown, D.P. (Canadian, b. 1939)

A painter from rural Ontario whose work consistently explores themes of time, society, and the inhabited landscape. As a boy he was mentored by A.Y. Jackson and Will Ogilvie, but it was his family's temporary move to northern Europe, where he first encountered an art-historical pantheon that included Vermeer and Bruegel, that had the greatest impact on his technique and subjects.

Burne-Jones, Edward (British, 1833–1898)

A largely self-taught painter, illustrator, and designer, who became interested in art after meeting William Morris at Oxford, where Burne-Jones had intended to study for the priesthood. In the 1850s he moved to London, joining the Pre-Raphaelites soon before they disbanded. Like his forerunners in the group, he chose subjects that were largely medieval and mythical.

Bush, Jack (Canadian, 1909–1977)

A member of Painters Eleven, formed in 1953, Bush found his real voice only after critic Clement Greenberg visited his studio in 1957 and focused on his watercolours. Out of these Bush developed the shapes and broad colour planes that would come to characterize a personal colour-field style, parallel to the work of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. With them, Bush participated in Greenberg's 1964 exhibition *Post Painterly Abstraction*.

Camus, Albert (French, 1913–1960)

A major writer and intellectual of the twentieth century, Camus's work was infused with philosophy and revolutionary politics and profoundly influenced by his upbringing in Algeria (then a French territory). He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957, at the age of forty-four.

Canadian Group of Painters

Founded in 1933 after the disbanding of the Group of Seven, by former members and their associates, the Canadian Group of Painters championed modernist painting styles against the entrenched traditionalism of the Royal Canadian Academy. They provided a platform for artists across Canada who were pursuing a variety of new concerns, from the formal experimentation of Bertram Brooker to the modern figure subjects of Prudence Heward and Pegi Nicol MacLeod and the expressive landscapes of Emily Carr.

casein

A milk phosphoprotein, casein is strongly adhesive and commonly employed as glue or as a binding ingredient in paint. Casein paint is used as an alternative to tempera.

Chambers, Jack (Canadian, 1931–1978)

A London, Ontario, painter and avant-garde filmmaker, whose meditative paintings typically depict domestic subjects. Chambers was committed to regionalism, despite the international outlook he developed during five years of artistic training in Madrid. He was one of the founders of CARFAC, Canada's artists' rights protection agency. (See *Jack Chambers: Life & Work* by Mark Cheetham.)

Close, Chuck (American, b. 1940)

An artist widely renowned for his enormous Photorealist portraits, created through a painstaking process that involves breaking up his subject into gridded increments and then methodically recreating it on canvas. In addition to painting he has mastered an array of printmaking and photographic techniques.

Coen, Joel (American, b. 1954), and Ethan Coen (American, b. 1957)

Known as "the Coen brothers," this sibling duo has written, directed, and produced some of the most widely admired and commercially successful films in contemporary cinema, including *Fargo* (1996), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), and *No Country for Old Men* (2007). They work across genres and often with the same actors.

Conceptual art

Traced to the work of Marcel Duchamp but not codified until the 1960s, Conceptual art is a general term for art that emphasizes ideas over form. The finished product may even be physically transient, as with land art or performance art.

Constable, John (British, 1776–1837)

Viewed today, along with William J.M. Turner, as one of the greatest British landscape and sky painters of the nineteenth century. Constable painted mostly in his native region of Suffolk and the surrounding areas. He took a more expressive approach to his paintings than many of his predecessors and contemporaries.

Conti, Tito (Italian, 1842–1924)

A painter of genre scenes and figures known for his exquisite draftsmanship. His work is characterized by intense colours and graceful figures. He trained at the Institute of Fine Arts in Florence, where he lived throughout his life.

Dalí, Salvador (Spanish, 1904–1989)

The star of the Surrealists and one of his era's most exuberant personalities, Dalí is best known for his naturalistically rendered dreamscapes. *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931, with its melting clock faces, remains one of the twentieth century's most parodied artworks.

Delva, Thierry (Belgian/Canadian, b. 1955)

A sculptor and conceptual artist concerned with issues raised by twentieth-century modernism, including (self-)referentiality, content and form, and material. His work is exhibited regularly throughout Canada. He is a professor at NSCAD University in Halifax.

Eakins, Thomas (American, 1844–1916)

A painter, sculptor, and photographer best known for his psychological and often unflattering portrait paintings. Success came posthumously to Eakins; little admired during his life, in the 1930s he came to be celebrated as one of his era's greatest American artists.

Estes, Richard (American, b. 1932)

A Photorealist painter whose pictures are often constructed from more than one photographic source image, thereby presenting a "reality" that never existed or could never be perceived by the naked eye. His preferred subject is the built environment, typically of New York City.

Fischl, Eric (b. 1948)

One of his era's most important figurative painters, Fischl's early work concentrates on depicting the dark side of the American suburbs—an environment he knew well from his upbringing on New York's Long Island—which was not considered a subject appropriate for art at the time. He taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design from 1974 to 1978.

Forrest, Greg (Canadian, b. 1965)

A Nova Scotian artist known for his 1:1 scale sculptures in bronze, wood, and steel. In his *Anything Less Is a Compromise*, the famous Stanley Cup hockey trophy sits atop a washing machine, evoking the pedestal-artefact formation standard in sculpture; his *Drum Kit* presents The Who drummer Keith Moon's 1964 instrument scattered across the floor. These bronzes are in the collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in Halifax.

Forrestall, Tom (Canadian, b. 1936)

A painter associated with Atlantic Realism whose carefully crafted, compelling pictures draw from a wide range of real and imagined sources. Mentored by Alex Colville at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, in the 1950s, Forrestall paints in egg tempera, a technique introduced to him by Colville and Forrestall's classmate Christopher Pratt.

French, Jared (American, 1905–1988)

A mostly figurative painter and photographer, and an important member of the Depression-era gay artistic community. He was a member of the PaJaMa photographic collective along with his wife, Margaret Hoening, and his lover Paul Cadmus. He was deeply interested in Carl Jung's psychoanalytical theories and suggested that his paintings be viewed in light of Jung's writings.

French existentialism

A mid-twentieth-century cultural movement that manifested in literature, film, and philosophy. Popularly associated with the philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, its main ideas are that human existence is essentially inexplicable and meaningless and that human beings are free and independent actors.

Freud, Lucian (German/British, 1922–2011)

A figurative painter equally influenced by Surrealism, New Objectivity, and Ingres's variety of French classicism, Freud nonetheless remained apart from any contemporary art movement. A grandson of Sigmund Freud, he produced an intensely personal body of work, with his models selected from his own family and immediate circle. Similarities can be drawn between his work and that of painter Francis Bacon.

Giotto (Italian, 1266/67–1337)

An acknowledged master of the early Italian Renaissance who was equally celebrated in his own day: critics including Dante praised the naturalism of his pictures and considered him to have revived painting after a centuries-long slump. Among his most spectacular achievements is the fresco cycle decorating the walls of the Arena Chapel, Padua.

golden section

A mathematical concept applied to proportion, in which a straight line or rectangle is divided into two unequal parts: the smaller portion relates to the larger portion by the same ratio that the larger portion relates to the whole.

Hart, Sarah (Canadian, 1880–1981)

Born in Saint John, Hart moved to New York in 1902 where she spent four years studying drawing, clay modelling, and wood carving at The Cooper Union. She returned to New Brunswick and in 1907 began teaching carving and painting, first in Sackville and later in various rural communities around the Maritimes.

Heidegger, Martin (German, 1889–1976)

A German philosopher most interested in ontology (the study of being), whose ideas influenced important figures from a wide range of academic disciplines, including art history, psychology, political theory, and theology. His most important work, *Being and Time*, was published in 1927. His membership in the Nazi party from 1933 until the end of the Second World War has led scholars to investigate fascist tendencies in his writings.

Hopper, Edward (American, 1882–1967)

Though he was a commercial illustrator in his early career, Hopper is widely and best known as a realist painter of American scenes, those that conveyed a palpable sense of solitude, even isolation, with motionless figures in indoor or outdoor settings. Among his most iconic works are *Nighthawks* and *Early Sunday Morning*.

Impressionism

A highly influential art movement that originated in France in the 1860s and is associated with the emergence of modern urban European society. Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and other Impressionists rejected the subjects and formal rigours of academic art in favour of scenes of nature and daily life and the careful rendering of atmospheric effects. They often painted outdoors.

Jackson, A.Y. (Canadian, 1882–1974)

A founding member of the Group of Seven and an important voice in the formation of a distinctively Canadian artistic tradition. A Montreal native, Jackson studied painting in Paris before moving to Toronto in 1913; his northern landscapes are characterized by the bold brush strokes and vivid colours of his Impressionist and Post-Impressionist influences.

Kubrick, Stanley (American, 1928–1999)

One of the most celebrated filmmakers of the twentieth century, whose influence extends internationally and across creative mediums, from cinema to painting. Among his numerous landmark productions are *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and *The Shining* (1980).

Lismer, Arthur (British/Canadian, 1885–1969)

A landscape painter and founding member of the Group of Seven, Lismer immigrated to Canada from England in 1911. He was also an influential educator of adults and children, and he created children's art schools at both the Art Gallery of Ontario (1933) and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (1946).

Luminism

In the mid-twentieth century, critics began to use the term "Luminism" to describe a style of American landscape art that grew out of the Hudson River School some hundred years earlier. Like the Impressionists, American Luminists were interested in representing effects of light, but in contrast to their French counterparts, their paintings are highly detailed and their brush strokes hidden. Key figures in this group include Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, John Frederick Kensett, and Fitz Henry Lane.

Mackay, D.C. (Canadian, 1906–1979)

A Maritime illustrator and printmaker who trained internationally in London and Paris before settling permanently in Halifax. Mackay joined the Royal Canadian Navy in 1939, serving first as a lieutenant and later as a war artist. On returning he became the principal of the Nova Scotia College of Art (later the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design), and remained in the role until his retirement in 1971.

magic realism

A term used for artistic or literary productions in which dreamlike, irrational, or supernatural elements appear in a realistic setting. This fusion of the real and the fantastic is found in the work of writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and painters such as Giorgio de Chirico, André Derain, and the Dadaists.

Magritte, René (Belgian, 1898–1967)

A major figure in twentieth-century art, and one of the most important Surrealist painters. Magritte was introduced to Surrealism by André Derain and Paul Eluard while living in Paris in the late 1920s, and collaborated actively with the group through the 1930s. Among his many famous works are *The Treachery of Images* and *The Son of Man*.

Manet, Édouard (French, 1832–1883)

Considered a forerunner of the modernist movement in painting, Manet eschewed traditional subject matter for depictions of contemporary urban life that incorporated references to classic works. Although his work was critically dismissed, his unconventional painting style influenced the Impressionists.

Masaccio (Italian, 1401–1428)

An early Italian Renaissance master, whose signature use of light (to model his figures) and perspective (to situate them in three-dimensional space) influenced the development of Florentine painting. His *Holy Trinity*, a fresco in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, exemplifies his innovative style. Masaccio died at the age of twenty-seven in Rome.

Moore, Henry (British, 1898–1986)

One of the twentieth century's most important sculptors. From its beginning, Moore's work was influenced by non-European sculpture; later he also drew from natural sources, such as bones and pebbles. His technique most often involved carving directly into his material, whether wood, stone, or plaster.

Nutt, Elizabeth Styring (British/Canadian, 1870–1946)

A painter and educator who spent twenty-five years in Nova Scotia, where, as principal, she helped guide the Victoria School of Art and Design through its transformation into the Nova Scotia College of Art. She favoured rural English subjects for her paintings throughout her career but also painted many Atlantic landscapes.

Painters Eleven

An artists' group active from 1953 to 1960, formed by eleven Abstract Expressionist Toronto-area painters, including Harold Town, Jack Bush, and William Ronald. They joined together in an effort to increase their exposure, given the limited interest in abstract art in Ontario at the time.

Photorealism

An art style that reached its peak in the United States in the 1970s, in which paintings—often large-format acrylics—imitate or even duplicate photographs. Also called Hyperrealism and Superrealism, Photorealism has been most famously practised by Chuck Close, Malcolm Morley, and Richard Estes.

plein air

French for "open air," used to describe the practice of painting or sketching outdoors to observe nature and in particular the changing effects of light.

Pointillism

A painting technique developed in 1886 by Georges Seurat and Paul Signac as an offshoot of Impressionism. In this style, rather than broken brush strokes, artists used thousands of small dots of intense and complementary colours that coalesced to make their images. In this way they developed an understanding of how the human eye works and the reality of light as a spectrum of colour.

Pop art

A movement of the late 1950s to early 1970s in Britain and the United States, which adopted imagery from commercial design, television, and cinema. Pop art's most recognized proponents are Richard Hamilton, David Hockney, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein.

Post-Impressionism

A term coined by the British art critic Roger Fry in 1910 to describe painting produced originally in France between about 1880 and 1905 in response to Impressionism's artistic advances and limitations. Central figures include Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh.

Pratt, Christopher (Canadian, b. 1935)

A renowned Newfoundland painter and printmaker whose work is characterized by precision, flatness, intense focus on a single subject, and an almost artificial sense of light. His pictures of ordinary local scenes and figures have an otherworldly quality. He designed the provincial flag of Newfoundland and Labrador in 1980.

Pratt, Mary (Canadian, b. 1935)

One of Canada's most prominent artists, whose use of light in particular transforms quotidian objects and moments into deeply meaningful subjects. Pratt's style developed in response to the demands on her time as the mother of four children; unable to paint scenes that struck her in the moment, she began recording them with a camera for later use.

Precisionism

Precisionism was a tendency, rather than a formal school or organized movement, in American art of the 1920s and 1930s. It is characterized by simple, sharply outlined forms; the smooth handling of paint; and American regionalist, urban, or industrial subjects. Leading Precisionists included Charles Sheeler and Elsie Driggs.

realism

A style of art in which subjects are depicted as factually as possible. Realism also refers to a nineteenth-century art movement, led by Gustave Courbet, concerned with the representation of daily modern life, rather than mythological, religious, or historical subjects.

Renaissance

The term used since the nineteenth century to refer to the Western art historical period approximately 1400–1600. The Renaissance is associated with the return to classical style in art and architecture, following the medieval period.

Riopelle, Jean-Paul (Canadian, 1923–2002)

A towering figure in Québécois modern art who, like the other members of the Automatistes, was interested in Surrealism and abstract art. Riopelle moved to Paris in 1947, where he participated in the last major exhibition of the Parisian Surrealists, organized by Marcel Duchamp and André Breton.

Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (RCA)

An organization of professional artists and architects, modelled after national academies long present in Europe, such as the Royal Academy of Arts in the U.K. (founded in 1768) and the French Academy (founded in 1648). The RCA was founded in 1880 by the Ontario Society of Artists and the Art Association of Montreal.

Royle, Stanley (British, 1888–1961)

A painter principally of Post-Impressionist landscapes. During the Depression financial hardship led him to move from rural England, where he was born and spent the better part of his life, to Canada. He taught first at the Nova Scotia College of Art in Halifax and later at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, before returning to England in 1945.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (French, 1905–1980)

A central figure in the development and spread of existentialism, a philosophy of existence that attempts to chart what it means to be human. His book *Being and Nothingness* (1943) is considered his masterpiece. Existentialist thinkers in his circle included Simone de Beauvoir, his long-time lover.

serigraphy

A name for what is now typically described as "screen printing." It was advanced in 1940 by a group of American artists working in the silkscreen process who wished to distinguish their work from commercial prints made by the same method.

Seurat, Georges (French, 1859–1891)

An influential painter, Seurat was a pioneer of the Neo-Impressionist movement, departing from Impressionism's relative spontaneity and practising more formal structure and symbolic content. Along with Paul Signac, he developed Pointillism, a technique adopted by other painters such as Camille Pissarro, Piet Mondrian, and Wassily Kandinsky.

Shahn, Ben (Lithuanian/American, 1898–1969)

An influential painter, lithographer, and photographer whose artworks and career reflect a lifelong commitment to social justice. The paintings Shahn made before 1945, such as the portraits that refer to the Dreyfus Affair, were specific and highly detailed, while his later work was more inventive and addressed more general themes.

Signac, Paul (French, 1863–1935)

A Post-Impressionist painter who, with Georges Seurat, developed Pointillism—a painstaking method of painting that drew from colour theory—and created detailed figurative images through the application of small dots of colour. In 1884 he and Seurat were among the founders of the Société des artistes indépendants, which held annual exhibitions of advanced art for thirty years.

Spalding, Jeffrey (Canadian, b. 1951)

An artist, curator, educator, and museum director. Spalding is an important figure in contemporary Canadian art, whose multimedia artistic practice and broad activities within the national art scene influenced the direction and reception of conceptual art, video art, and painting. He received the Order of Canada in 2007.

Surrealism

An early twentieth-century literary and artistic movement that began in Paris. Surrealism aimed to express the workings of the unconscious, free of convention and reason, and was characterized by fantastic images and incongruous juxtapositions. The movement spread globally, influencing film, theatre, and music.

Tooker, George (American, 1920–2011)

A painter whose mysterious images of twentieth-century urban life brim with anxiety and foreboding. Committed to figurative art during a time when American modernism was defined by abstraction, Tooker existed at the margins of the art world for much of his career. Paul Cadmus and Jared French were important early influences on his style and artistic sensibility.

Uccello, Paolo (Italian, 1397–1475)

A painter and mathematician of the early Italian Renaissance, whose innovations in the use and techniques of perspective would influence later generations of Old Master artists. His most famous work is *The Battle of San Romano*, completed for the Palazzo Medici in Florence.

Whistler, James McNeill (American/British, 1834–1903)

A painter widely considered ahead of his time. He developed his unique style—which might be most closely associated with Post-Impressionism, still decades away—in the 1850s and 1860s as a student in Paris and London, drawing from sources including Spanish and Baroque painting, contemporary French avant-gardism, and Japanese prints and artistic principles.

Wolstenholme, Colleen (Canadian, b. 1963)

Wolstenholme is a prolific artist and educator whose provocative, multidisciplinary practice encompasses collage, pen-and-ink drawing, embroidery, jewellery, and sculpture (for which she is perhaps best known). Her work is held in numerous Canadian institutions including Montreal's Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in Halifax, and the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. She was shortlisted for the prestigious Sobey Art Award in 2002.

Wyeth, Andrew (American, 1917–2009)

A painter who conveyed the people and pastoral landscapes of his rural Pennsylvania community in spare, poetic images. Though he received high critical praise for some paintings, including his famous *Christina's World*, his realist, regionalist work was considered out of step with contemporary art for much of his career.

Zuck, Tim (Canadian, b. 1947)

Steeped in conceptual art as a student at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and California Institute of the Arts in the 1970s, Zuck developed a painting and drawing practice that probes questions of perception and representation. His focused examinations of seemingly simple objects and shapes reveal their complexities to the viewer.

Sources & Resources

PART 6

Alex Colville's working life was very much in the public eye, from his first exhibitions in the 1950s until the touring retrospectives that capped his exhibition career in the 1990s and 2000s. He never retired, but worked on new paintings well into his eighties. As a result, there is a large amount of material on his work and life—articles, books, reviews, films, and more. What follows is an introduction to the sources and resources available for this important Canadian artist.

Major Exhibitions

Installation view of the *Alex Colville* exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, in 2014, photograph by Dean Tomlinson.

1951   November, New Brunswick Museum, Saint John. First solo exhibition in a public gallery.

1953   Hewitt Gallery, New York. First solo commercial exhibition.

1966   33rd Venice Biennale; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Hart House Gallery, University of Toronto.

1983   Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Toured Canada and Germany.

1993	March 29–May 16, *Selected Drawings*, Owens Art Gallery, Sackville. Toured Canada.
1994	September 30, 1994–January 15, 1995, *Alex Colville: Paintings, Prints, and Processes 1983–1994*, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.
2000	June 23–September 17, *Milestones*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
2003 –05	September 27–November 30, 2003, *Alex Colville: Return*, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax. Toured December 20, 2003–February 29, 2004, to Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton; March 20–May 31, 2004, Museum London; June 20–August 8, 2004, University of Toronto Art Centre; August 27–October 17, 2004, Edmonton Art Gallery; and November 2004–January 2005, Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon.
2014 –15	August 23, 2014–January 4, 2015, *Alex Colville*, Art Gallery of Ontario. Toured April 24 – September 7, 2015, to National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

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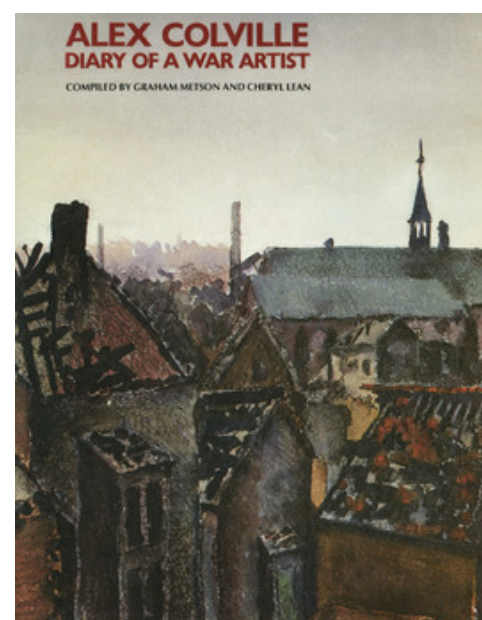
Cover of *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist*, eds. Graham Metson and Cheryl Lean. (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1981), featuring Alex Colville's watercolour drawing *Dead City, 24 Feb.–2 Mar. 1945* (detail), 1945.

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"At Home With Alex Colville." *Telescope*. CBC Television, September 21, 1967.

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Hutchinson, Don. *Alex Colville: The Splendour of Order*. Montreal: Gynus-Minerva Films and Film Arts, 1984. VHS, 57 min.

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About the Author

Ray Cronin

Ray Cronin is a writer and curator living in Halifax, Nova Scotia. From 2001 to 2015 he worked at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, as Curator (2001–7) and as Director and CEO (2007–15). He is the founding curator of the Sobey Art Award. He is currently Vice President of TOTAL Museum and Fine Arts Services, a museum logistics company.

A graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (BFA) and the University of Windsor (MFA), Cronin is the author of numerous catalogue essays as well as articles for Canadian and American art magazines. In 2000 he received the inaugural Christina Sabat Award for Critical Review in the Arts. He was the visual arts columnist for New Brunswick's *Daily Gleaner* (Fredericton) and *Here* (Saint John). As a freelance writer he has published reviews and articles on art for several magazines over a twenty-five-year career.

Cronin has taught writing for the arts in Fredericton, Ottawa, and Charlottetown, and visual art at the University of Windsor, the New Brunswick College of Craft and Design, and NSCAD University.

His extensive curatorial projects include retrospective exhibitions of the work of Erica Rutherford, Nancy Edell, Rick Burns, and Thierry Delva as well as the nationally touring exhibitions *Graeme Patterson: Woodrow and Arena: The Art of Hockey*. He is the author of *Marion Wagschal* (Battat Contemporary: Montreal, 2010), and he has contributed essays to books on Mary Pratt, John Greer, David Askevold, Graeme Patterson, Colleen Wolstenholme, and Garry Neill Kennedy, among others.

> " I knew Alex Colville for fifteen years, at the end of his long life. We talked mostly about philosophy when we met, and occasionally about politics. He showed me various paintings at different stages of completion and occasionally reminisced about his place in the art world, and that world's perception of him, which he felt was limited, at best. He was as far from the popular cliché of an artist as every real artist I've ever met. He lived his own definition of what it took to make good art—to struggle to produce work that was never commercial, sentimental, or retrograde. That he did, creating some of the finest paintings in Canadian art history. "
>
> —
>
> Ray Cronin

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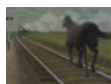
Horse and Train, 1954. (See below for details.)

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Biography: Captain D.A. Colville at work in Ottawa, in front of his completed *Infantry Near Nijmegen, Holland*, 1946. George Metcalf Archival Collection, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa (20040082-03). © Canadian War Museum.

Key Works: *Nude and Dummy*, 1950. (See below for details.)

Significance & Critical Issues: Alex Colville, *Horse and Girl*, 1984. (See below for details.)

Style & Technique: *Kiss with Honda*, 1989. (See below for details.)

Sources & Resources: *Alex Colville in his studio, Wolfville, Nova Scotia*, 1983. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (R11224-4384-1-F). Photo credit: Walter Curtin, Library and Archives Canada.
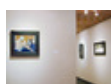
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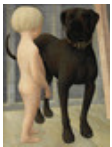
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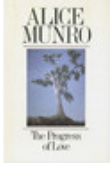
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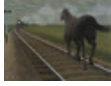
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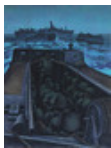
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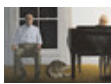
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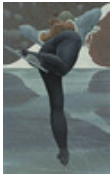
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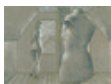
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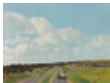
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A Colville family portrait, 1951. From left to right: John, Graham, Alex, Rhoda, Ann, and Charles. Courtesy of the Colville Family.

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Alex and Rhoda Colville on their wedding day 1942. The couple are pictured in front of Rhoda's family home in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, where they lived from 1973 until 1998. Courtesy of the Colville Family.

Alex and Rhoda Colville, with Min, outside their home in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, 1988. Courtesy of the Colville Family. Photo credit: Guido Mangold.

Alex Colville, age eleven, near Tidnish, Nova Scotia, where his family had a summer cottage. Courtesy of the Colville Family.

Alex Colville, age eighteen, with his parents, David and Florence. Courtesy of the Colville Family.

Alex Colville, C.C., 1986. Photograph by Harry Palmer.

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Colville Mackerel 6066 (Dime), 2013, photograph by William Eakin. © William Eakin. Courtesy of Stephen Bulger Gallery.
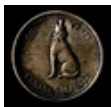
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Colville working on his painting *Bodies in a Grave*, 1946. Courtesy of the Colville Family.

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Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, c. 1426–28 (altered in 1680, restored in 1980), by Masaccio. Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.

First-year portrait class taught by Stanley Royle. Alex Colville stands at easel, far right. Mount Allison University Archives, Sackville (2007.07/501).

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Lieutenant D. Alex Colville, War Artist, Third Canadian Infantry Division, Germany, March 4, 1945. Department of National Defence Archives, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (PA-206003). Photograph by Lieut. Barney J. Gloster.

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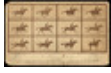
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